

Chapter One – The Investigation

Friday 28 June, 1996

Amelia Bones looked on as Professor Dumbledore picked up the broken statue head and handed it to Harry Potter after changing it into a portkey. The Ministry of Magic lobby was in complete disarray having been the scene of the first public reappearance of Voldemort since the story of his rebirth had been published. She had received a frantic call moments before from one of the evening shift Aurors who had returned to find Dumbledore battling the evil wizard Voldemort in the lobby of the Ministry of magic.

The events of the evening were shocking to say the least. Apparently a group of Hogwarts students had entered the building after hours and somehow made their way down to the hall of prophecies where they were attacked by at least a dozen Death Eaters.

“Wait a tic,” cried Bones, but before she could stop him the Potter boy disappeared.

She watched with increasing frustration as the integrity of the largest crime scene in years became increasingly contaminated. A reporter and photographer from the *Daily Prophet* had somehow made their way in and she saw a flash from the photographers cameras.

“Straighthand,” she commanded. “Get them out of here for at least the next hour.” The young Auror quickly complied. The Director of Magical Law Enforcement did not take kindly to her instructions being disregarded.

The building was in chaos. Lead crime scene investigator Connie Hammer was taking photographs with a wizarding camera. She took a photograph of each of the students who were there as well as each of the injured. Hammer was surprised to have seen retired Master Auror Moody, Shacklebolt and Nymphadora Tonks among the injured. Neither of them had been on duty to receive a call, and Moody hadn't been back at the Auror office in almost a year. Apparently the main battle had taken place down in the ninth level section of the Department of Mysteries. She documented the damage done within

the room containing the time turners, the brain room, offices, and finally the Death Chamber.

The stories were conflicting, but she had heard that he who-must-not-be-named as well as his rumored second in charge, Sirius Black had both been seen in the building.

Hammer took a photo for each of the captured men wearing Death Eater robes. Among those there she was shocked to see one of Fudge's top supporters, Lucius Malfoy and one of the department heads, Walden McNair. Beside them were several of the escaped Death Eaters – Rabastan and Rudolphus Lestranger, Antonin Dolohov and the former supervisor of the Department of Mysteries research group, Augustus Rookwood.

Hammer continued taking photographs of the injured. She wasn't surprised to see Moody, or the other Aurors among the wounded, but was thankful that they'd only been injured while fighting such a dangerous bunch of Death Eaters. Given their horrible reputation she wondered how there had even been any survivors.

Meanwhile, Mediwitches were looking over the injured. Bones walked over to the area where the other students were being treated. They each appeared to have fight related injuries of varying degrees of seriousness. Upon closer inspection, she was both surprised and pleased to note that none of them looked to be life threatening. The worst appeared to be a girl about fifteen with a nasty looking burn mark running diagonally from her left clavicle down to her right hip. She looked at the others for a moment and saw a young girl sitting on a chair. Her injuries appeared to be the least severe. Looking at her auburn hair Bones hazarded a guess.

"Hello, Miss. I'm Amelia Bones. What's your name? Has a mediwitch had a chance to look at that leg yet?"

"A minute ago. She told me to wait here Ma'am. My name is Ginny Weasley," the young girl replied. She was obviously scared.

In as gentle a voice as she could muster, the seventy year old witch asked, "While we wait for her, can we talk for a few minutes?"

The girl nodded.

Bones knelt down on the floor so they were more or less at eye level. She asked, "Can you tell me what happened?"

Ginny replied, "We followed Harry from school here to rescue his godfather and we were ambushed by a bunch of Death Eaters. They tried to get a glass ball from Harry. He wouldn't give it to them. He tipped a shelf of them over onto the Death Eaters and we tried to run away. We ran in different directions and they chased after us. We met up in a room. Neville and Harry were carrying Hermione who had gotten hurt. Ron was acting weird. Harry told Luna to lock the doors, but they followed us so we ran into this big room. Mr. Malfoy kept trying to get the ball from Harry but Neville had accidentally broken it." She stopped and looked over as she heard Hermione whimpering from pain.

Bones encouraged her to continue saying, "Your friend is in good hands. Then what happened?"

Ginny continued, "Professor Dumbledore and the others came and helped us. He tied up the Death Eaters that Harry and Neville had stunned and helped capture the others. Then that Lestranger woman did something to Sirius. He fell back through that curtain and disappeared. Harry tried to go after him, but Professor Lupin stopped him. Harry chased after her. Professor Dumbledore tied up the others and went after him. That's all I know, I swear." She was shaking with fright.

Bones saw a young mediwitch waiting to treat the Weasley girl and said, "Thank you, Miss Weasley. You've been very helpful. We can talk more another day." She shuddered at what she had heard and made her way back to Strighthand. She said, "Auror Strighthand, get a detail of aurors and hitwizards to process this bunch of prisoners. Be certain to restun each of them and carefully search them. They might have portkeys on them. Do not allow *anyone* outside the immediate detail to talk with them or interfere. None of them are to be moved from the holding cells for any reason. Do not let any of their property get lost or misplaced. Is that understood?"

"Yes Director. Clearly understood."

“Scrimgeour.”

“Yes, Director?”

“Take a detail and look around the ninth level and be certain to bag any wands or other items that they may have left behind. Start in the Death Chamber and work your way back to the Hall of Prophecies. Catalog everything and bring anything that you find to my office. Don’t let Fudge or his guard interfere. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Director.”

She walked back over to where the adults were being treated. Master Auror (retired) Alastor Moody had a nasty cut on his arm that had recently been treated. She grimaced as he refitted his artificial eye back in place. Auror Tonks was being treated for a chest injury. She didn’t look to be in very good condition. Senior Auror Shacklebolt was quietly talking to a man that she recognized as Remus Lupin who the Weasley girl had mentioned. Bones asked, “Senior Auror Shacklebolt, are you on duty?”

The large auror replied, “Not scheduled, Director. How can I help?”

“Were you involved with the fight down there?”

She saw him hesitate for only a moment before answering, “Yes, Director.”

Bones considered her next question for a moment and asked, “Are you or Mr. Lupin badly injured?”

“No, Director.”

Bones replied, “Good. I want to see both of you up in my conference room in ten minutes. Do not talk with anyone else in the meantime.” She watched as the two men got up and made their way to the elevator. Shacklebolt appeared to be limping.

She made her way over to Moody and asked, “Moody, do I need to thank you or arrest you? What were you doing here?”

Moody replied, "Tonks and I were having a pint when we received word that there had been a break-in."

"Cut the crap, Moody. Dumbledore's not so secret Order that you are a part of went chasing after those six students. How did you happen to know that they were here, of all places?"

Moody quickly decided to give a bit more information and replied, "One of the teachers figured it out and must have told Dumbledore."

"Who is officially wanted for questioning and went missing for over a month. Merlin Moody, what happened?"

Moody decided to keep his pension and give out a bit more information. He replied, "The Potter kid went chasing after his godfather, Black and got himself caught in an ambush. We found them in the Death Chamber holding their own against twelve Death Eaters led by Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrangle. Malfoy was trying to get one of the prophecies from Potter and Frank Longbottom's kid. Lestrangle had taken down Tonks and Black was dueling her."

"Tonks?"

Moody shook his head and said, "No. Black was fighting Lestrangle. He came here to rescue Potter."

That didn't make sense but Amelia had long learned not to contradict a friendly witness. The Weasley girl had also told her that Potter and the other students were there to rescue Black. Bones asked, "Then what happened?"

Moody continued, "Lestrangle hit Black with a stunner. Black tripped and fell through the arch. Potter chased after her. I tried to help Tonks. That was thirty minutes ago."

Bones considered her options. Arresting Moody wouldn't do anyone any good. She said, "Be back in my office at nine tomorrow and don't add any varnish to your story in the meanwhile."

She looked on as the team of mediwitches prepared to transport Tonks. One looked over to her and she nodded approval.

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Meanwhile Senior Investigator Hammer had just finished taking photographs in the Death Chamber. She had found five of the Death Eater masks and seen the owner's names written on the back of them. She had carefully taken two photographs of each of them and had her assistant Anna Daily place a yellow evidence ring around each of them. She had taken photographs of almost two dozen wands including one that had been smashed.

Hammer and Daily made their way through the different rooms. The time turner room was a sea of broken glass mixed in with large smears of blood. Apparently someone had smashed into one of the glass cabinets and seriously cut themselves.

The next room was in equal disarray. The floor was covered with hundreds of gallons of a smelly greenish liquid. There were four gray football-sized creatures writhing on the floor, looking like a cross between a large squid with three foot tentacles and a human brain. They saw several others floating in the other glass tanks. Disgusted, they left the room hoping to never see the nasty creatures again.

Entering the office, they saw a desk turned over and half a dozen scorch marks burned into the floor and walls. Obviously they were recent as there were several pieces of smoldering wood on the floor by one of the wooden desks. Hammer took photos of each of the spell marks as well as a wand found by the wood chips. As she took each photograph, Daily marked the time and location in her logbook.

The Hall of Prophecies was in complete chaos. Three of the shelves had been tipped over. Hundreds of the irreplaceable glass spheres were on the floor. Some were intact and others were cracked, but most were smashed. Hammer told Daily, "Be careful not to touch any of the glass balls."

Twenty-nine year old Daily didn't have to be told twice. She replied, "This place gives me the creeps." A moment later she said, "Look."

She pointed next to one of the shelves. Next to it was another Death Eater mask.

“Mark it,” replied Hammer.

Daily drew her wand around the area with the incantation *Markus Lineus*. She carefully turned the mask over so the inside was facing up. Etched in the forehead area were the letters *LM*. Hammer took several photographs and they continued their search.

Daily cast a portkey sensing spell over the area and found a length of cord on the floor. “Don’t touch it,” directed Hammer. “It’s still active. It must have been a two-way portkey.” She carefully marked the area around the rope as Hammer photographed the process.

Looking around, Hammer added, “I think that’s it. Lets get these printed, copied and cataloged. We’ll be lucky to be done by morning.”

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At the Gringotts Trust Department sat a ledger book very similar to the wizarding birth notice book that was kept at Hogwarts. This book however was much more selective. The Goblins kept the names of their account holders in it. The magical ledger recorded the deaths of the account holders. The death of Sirius Orion Black was recorded in the *death of a head of family* chapter indicating that a titled major account holder had passed away. Next to his name was the notation 28 June - 9:59 p.m. – London.

The Gringotts account manager for the account would be notified. He would locate the newly deceased wizard’s last will and execute the instructions that were documented. The process to locate and notify the heirs usually took no longer than a week.

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Meanwhile, at the scheduled rendezvous point, Voldemort grew increasingly angry. He had sent twelve of his best Death Eaters on what should have been a very simple mission. Not only was the prophecy destroyed, he was publicly spotted and bested by the old

muggle-loving fool. Through a blinding headache caused by the Potter brat, he waited for the others to return.

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Hammer and Daily were methodical in their work. The auror evidence camera film had each frame numbered so there was no possibility of someone inserting or removing an image from a roll. Each of the evidence rolls held 250 images, so the vast majority of crime scenes could be photographed with a single roll, again to eliminate the opportunity for images to be inserted into the evidence chain.

Daily's logbook was equally secured. Each logbook covered a month of investigations and was signed for at the beginning and end of a shift. As they were nearing the end of a month, the earlier pages were each signed by the various shift supervisors that she had worked with. Daily had carefully recorded the location, time, frame number and circumstances for each of the photographs.

Fifty-five year old Hammer requested that the lab attendant make five copies of each of the photos. When he was done, they each signed the back of each of the images and had them stamped 'evidence' with the date and case number marked on each image. The lab attendant took the negatives and one set of the photographs as well as a copy of Daily's logbook pages and sealed them within an evidence box. Hammer and Daily watched as the attendant handed the evidence box to the property supervisor. Each of them signed their names on the form, and were given a copy. It was six a.m.

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Scrimgeour and investigator Wilson had followed a few minutes behind Hammer and Daily. They also searched for evidence, adding additional sets of eyes to the investigation. Scrimgeour was one of the first on the scene and had witnessed Dumbledore dueling with he who-must-not-be-named. He was amazed to see the Potter boy throw off the evil wizard and had been astonished to see the dark lord grab Lestranger and leave.

As head of the auror division of the magical law enforcement branch of the ministry, Scrimgeour reported directly to Bones. The separation

between branches was such that Bones had a dotted line reporting relation to the Wizengamot head and the Minister of Magic. Specifically the department was funded through the MoM, but enforced the laws voted on by the Wizengamot.

Scrimgeour had been at Hogwarts the previous year watching his friend Amos Diggory cheer on his son for the final leg of the Triwizard Tournament. He watched as Fudge summarily dismissed Potter's story that he who-must-not-be-named had come back somehow, spirit reunited with his body. Apparently Potter had been telling a truth that no one wanted to hear.

Scrimgeour recognized that with the evening's revelation, Fudge's tenure as Minister of Magic had come to an end. Sensing an opportunity, he quickly made the decision to publicly back Dumbledore's return to head of the Wizengamot and position himself for a run at the minister position. He finished his walk through, noting the names on the masks and carefully counting the wands in his logbook. Hammer and Davis hadn't missed anything. He had Davis sign his logbook and went to see Bones.

He got out of the elevator on the second level at 4:15 and walked down the corridor to Bones' office. As he got there, Shacklebolt and another man that Scrimgeour didn't recognize were just leaving.

"Come in, Rufus," said Amelia. She looked like she was ready for business, dressed properly, unlike Fudge who had arrived wearing his bathrobe. "What did you find?"

Scrimgeour replied, "There was evidence scattered throughout the ninth floor. Hammer had identified six Death Eater masks either in the death chamber or the hall of prophecies. There was an active portkey in the hall of prophecies. Apparently they had portkeyed in there somehow despite our wards. Potter and his friends must have put up a pretty good fight. Malfoy's mask was nearby along with hundreds of smashed prophecies. The kids must have split up, as there were scorch marks from spells all over the department. The time turner room was a disaster. There was quite a bit of blood there.

Bones looked at her notes for a moment and replied, "Must have been from Jugson. He died in the secure holding cells two hours ago. He had a huge piece of glass embedded in his back. What else?"

"There were names marked on the inside of the Death Eater masks. The ones we found were marked with..." he checked his notes and continued, "Jugson, Crabbe, Antonin Dolohov, the initials AR, the initials LM and McNair."

"What else?"

"In different rooms we found eighteen wands. One of them was smashed apparently having been stepped on a time or two. The glass tanks in one of the other rooms had been smashed. There were some nasty looking creatures in them and on the floor." He changed the subject, asking, "Who was marking evidence in the lobby?"

Bones replied, "Straighthand, but the area was already contaminated. He did find a Death Eater mask marked Bella."

Just then there was a knock on her door. It was Wilson from the holding cells. "Excuse me, Director. Supervisor Legget asked me to give this to you." The gray haired witch accepted the sealed envelope and signed the receipt handing it back to the young Auror.

"Thank you, Wilson. Please return back to the holding cells and have Legget notify me if there are any changes."

As she was opening the envelope, Scrimgeour said, "We need to get Dumbledore renamed as head of the Wizengamot as soon as possible. The wizarding world is going to be counting on you to be strong as head of MLE, Director. Whatever I can do to help you, please let me know."

Bones looked at Scrimgeour for a moment, surprised at the sudden tangent, but agreed that the Wizengamot needed to be fully functional, and nodded.

A moment later she summarized what the other investigators had reported to her. "The package Connie delivered had photographs indicating that the other masks belonged to Nott, Rodolphus

Lestrangle, Rabastan Lestrangle, Walden McNair, Avery and Mulciber. There were photos of eleven men, each with a dark mark burned into the inside of their left forearm."

She picked up the report that Wilson had delivered from the search of the Death Eaters that was performed at the holding cells and said, "Additionally, identical portkeys were found on the persons of Malfoy, McNair and Jugson. There was a hand drawn map of the department of mysteries found in the pocket of Malfoy's Death Eater robes and a spare wand. Nott had a similar map in his pocket."

The evidence was damning. Two of Fudge's current or former department heads as well as his closest advisor would be charged with multiple counts of attempted murder as well as being Death Eaters. She thanked Scrimgeour and asked that he meet with her again in the afternoon.

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While the investigators were out collecting evidence, Dumbledore had spent a half hour talking with Fudge.

"It was really him. I saw him. He was really here," muttered Fudge.

Dumbledore patiently replied, "Yes, Cornelius. It really was Voldemort and his Death Eaters in this very building. He really did return last year like Harry had told us. You need to tell the wizarding world, and the Death Eaters who were captured need to be placed on trial as soon as possible. It's imperative that they not be allowed to escape."

Fudge nodded in agreement as if in a daze, but then replied, "But Lucius... He must have been under the Imperius." The conviction of his most visible supporter would be his undoing.

Dumbledore shook his head saying, "No, Cornelius. Everyone was here tonight of their own free will. I'm certain of it. Harry and his friends were led into a trap believing that they would be able to rescue Harry's Godfather."

"Black?" sputtered Fudge. "He must have escaped again."

"No, Cornelius," replied Dumbledore. "Sirius Black was an innocent man who came here tonight in an attempt to rescue Harry."

"But where is he?" demanded Fudge.

"He was killed by Bellatrix Lestrange and fell through the veil."

"It can't be," wished Fudge out loud.

"There were at least a dozen reliable witnesses," replied Dumbledore. "When I found them, Lucius was attempting to kill Harry and Neville Longbottom. He's as involved in Voldemort's plans as any man can be."

"But..." sputtered Fudge. However he realized that he had nothing else to say. He had gambled on Potter's story of Voldemort's rebirth being a complete falsehood and the evidence that he'd been wrong was scattered all over the ministry atrium. He didn't completely agree with Dumbledore's theory about Lucius, but without any evidence in hand, all he possessed was wishful thinking.

Dumbledore stood and said, "I must leave now, Cornelius. I'll be back late in the afternoon. I must return to the school now. I trust that you will have me reinstated in my various positions and have Delores removed from the castle by noon." Fudge nodded blankly and Dumbledore went back to check on the other students before returning to the castle to talk with Harry.

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One floor below, as Scrimgeour closed the door behind him, Amelia recalled her conversation with Shacklebolt and Lupin. She had spoken with each of them for about ten minutes each. While not an official deposition, their stories matched with the exceptions of the canards that they each had told her regarding how they had come to be in the building in the first place.

Their stories were consistent with Moody's, again varying with the aspect of how they had come to be there in the first place. In reality, Bones was well aware of Dumbledore's group. While she couldn't officially condone it, they had achieved a stunning success. Eleven

Death Eaters were off the streets and the only man lost was... She realized that that part would become quite sticky. If Black was fighting against the Death Eaters, then he must have come with Dumbledore as well as the Auror who had been working on the case to find him for the last three years. Setting that issue aside, then Potter's story that Pettigrew was alive must be true. She tried to rub the stress from her forehead and went to get another cup of tea. Pouring herself a large cup and squeezing a bit of lemon into it, she was tempted to recall Shackbolt, but decided to wait until he had been treated by one of the mediwitches. It would be a very long day.

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Fudge made his way down to Amelia's office and walked in. Mustering as much of a business as usual face he asked, "Amelia, what have you found out?"

Bones replied, "There is sufficient evidence to charge each of the ten prisoners with multiple counts of attempted murder, assault, possession of Death Eater paraphernalia, membership in an illegal organization, and illegal entry into a restricted ministry area."

"Ten prisoners?" gulped Fudge. "I only saw Lestrage and he who-must-not-be-named."

Bones replied, "From what we know to be true, twelve Death Eaters lured those students to come here under the pretense of some sort of rescue mission. They were really trying to obtain a prophecy regarding the Potter boy and Voldemort. Malfoy and Bellatrix were leading the ambush. The kids tried to get away, capturing a few of the Death Eaters along the way and became trapped in the old death chamber. Dumbledore and some others found out that they were there, and led some sort of rescue-the-rescuer mission. The Potter boy chased after Bellatrix up into the atrium where he fought against both her and Voldemort until Dumbledore could come up and help. They were still fighting when some of the other Aurors began to arrive. Suddenly Voldemort decided to leave. He grabbed Lestrage and they left the building. The physical evidence against the Death Eaters is all over the Department of Mysteries. I had four Aurors photograph and catalog it."

The normally verbose Fudge had nothing to say. He squirmed in his chair for a minute.

There was a knock on the door and a mediwitch announced, "Excuse me Director. I wanted to let you know that the students have all been transported back to school. Auror Tonks was transported to St. Mungo's. Aurors Shacklebolt and Moody were treated and released. We'll be leaving now."

"Thank you, Renee," replied Bones.

After the mediwitch closed the door behind her, Fudge asked hopefully, "Has Lucius been released?"

Bones shook her head and replied, "None of them will be released. It appears that Malfoy and several of your department heads have been longtime Voldemort supporters."

"What about Black?" asked Fudge hoping to salvage some good news out of the evening. "I heard that he was here tonight."

Bones replied, "There is evidence to indicate that Black was an innocent man. Several witnesses saw him fighting the Death Eaters until he was killed by Bellatrix Lestrange."

Fudge saw an opportunity and said, "Maybe he was leading the raid and..."

"No," replied Bones with finality in her voice. "He arrived with the others to help the students. On that part we are certain." She didn't specifically say that he had arrived with Dumbledore.

Fudge replied, "I'll accept your theory about Black if you accept my theory about Lucius."

Bones shook her head and answered firmly, "No. Malfoy was clearly in the thick of it, and nothing that we can do now will help Black. You had best prepare your statement for the newspapers." She thought back to the article that had been published a few weeks back in the Quibbler. Apparently it was spot on.

Fudge stood up, looking ridiculous; wearing his bathrobe and holding his bowler hat. He nodded and replied, "Yes, I need to make an announcement."

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While Dumbledore was picking up his office after Harry, and Fudge was pondering his next moves, Scrimgeour was busy contacting various Wizengamot members. He urged them to reinstate Dumbledore as quickly as possible and fanned the fire to instigate a vote of no-confidence against Fudge. He eliminated a future rival by stressing the need to have an experienced person like Amelia as head of the DMLE.

By 8 a.m. he had contacted more than half of the members and set the wheels of change in motion. The remaining 45 members accepted department head Amos Diggory's submitted motion of no confidence seconded by Arthur Weasley.

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While Scrimgeour was finishing his lobbying efforts, Bones had concluded that Shackbolt had intentionally botched the Black investigation for the last several years. She understood his reasoning, but was unwilling to forget the whole affair either. She wrote orders to reassign him to be an undercover guard in the guise of a personal secretary to the Prime Minister.

In the brief meeting that they held, Kingsley understood the spoken and unspoken message that she had given him. There was no official blotch on his record. He simply had been given a time-out penalty for looking the other way. His reassignment was effective immediately and would last at least a year.

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By the end of the day, Fudge was out of office. Nominations would be taken the next day for an interim Minister of Magic. Most likely that person would be handed the position on a permanent basis within a week.

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The evening before the last day of school, the six students were called out of their dormitories after dinner. Normally Scrimgeour would have handled the depositions himself, but he had been appointed interim minister of magic a few hours before and was in a transition meeting with Fudge and Dumbledore at the ministry.

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Minerva McGonagall was back at the castle. She was not at all well and was still recovering from being hit by all of those stunners. Leaning heavily on her walking stick and wearing a tartan shawl despite the late June temperature, she called through the portrait door into the common room, "Potter, Weasley, Weasley, Granger and Longbottom, come with me please."

In truth, Harry had been expecting this call since coming back to the castle. He put his wand in his pocket and led the others out the door. A wave of guilt overcame him as he imagined the various charges that would surely be leveled at him – unlawful use of underage magic, breaking and entering and destruction of ministry property. He fully expected to have his wand snapped and be in prison by the next morning.

"Follow me if you would. Mr. Longbottom, straighten your hair." They walked to McGonagall's classroom. "Sit," she told them imperiously. A moment later, McGonagall and the five Gryffindors were met by an older woman and Luna Lovegood. She showed them her auror badge and said, "Good evening. My name is Senior Auror Connie Hammer. I'm the lead investigator for the Ministry of Magic case which occurred on the evening of 28 June 1996."

A moment later Amelia walked into the room and closed the door behind her. She looked at each of the children and said, "Hello. My name is Amelia Bones. I work at the Ministry in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. I'm happy to see each of you up and about. Connie and I would like to ask each of you a few questions so we can better understand what happened that night. Is that okay?" She looked at each of the teens as they nodded at her.

Hammer said, "Professor, you're welcome to leave if you have other things to do."

Amelia said, "Professor, you're also welcome to stay if you would prefer. We'll be about an hour."

McGonagall looked at the obviously frightened children and replied, "If you don't mind Director, I'll sit quietly in the back."

Amelia nodded and said, "Splendid. Perhaps we can begin. May I have each of your names please?"

Harry was surprised. He was expecting to be asked to surrender his wand and led away.

Luna began, then the others gave their name as well. Hammer nodded, confirming that they were the teens who she had photographed a few nights earlier. When it was Harry's turn, Hammer asked, "Mr. Potter, may I see your wand please?"

Luna sniggered quietly as Harry took his wand out of his pocket and handed it to the older woman. Hammer went to a work table and cast a variation of the *priori incantatum* charm to examine the last twenty spells performed with the wand. As the last few days had been written exams, Harry had only performed two charms since that evening. Hammer wrote down the spells, noting that they were mostly defensive in nature except for a handful of stunners and one failed dark curse.

Meanwhile, Bones continued her questioning. With the occasional interruption from Hermione, Harry told her the story of seeing the visions of Sirius being tortured.

Hermione explained that they had tried to find one of the professors for help and how they had been continuously threatened by Umbridge throughout the year. Hermione said, "Harry, show her your hand."

Reluctantly Harry held out his left hand. Amelia blanched as she read the words '*I must not tell lies*' clearly etched into the back of the teen's hand. She held his wrist and asked, "Harry, how did this happen?"

Harry explained the detentions that he had received and the reasons for receiving them. As Harry was explaining what had happened, a wave of guilt washed over McGonagall. She had failed to protect the students that she had been held responsible for. She recalled that Potter had been given almost constant detentions during the year, largely for nothing more than speaking the truth and standing up for his right to receive a proper education. He was far too willing to accept an unjust punishment rather than complain and she had done him a disservice by refusing to stand up for him.

Hammer showed them photos of each of the Death Eaters. The teens identified each of them except Goyle who had managed to keep his mask on the whole time. Hermione shuddered as she identified Dolohov as the Death Eater who had attempted to kill her. Harry, Neville, Luna, and Ginny described the duels in the Death Chamber in as much detail as they could.

When Harry got to the part of meeting Bellatrix in the atrium, Hammer stopped them for a moment and whispered to Bones, "There was an unidentified spell cast with his wand. It may have been a failed Cruciatus curse."

Bones maintained a neutral expression on her face and whispered, "Let's see what else he has to say."

A moment later she asked, "Harry, what happened when you got to the atrium?"

Harry said, "She threw several Cruciatus curses at me which I dodged and began mocking me about her killing Sirius. I tried to curse her back, but I couldn't. It didn't do anything when I hit her." Tears began streaming down his face. "A moment later she tried to get the prophecy from me, but it had already smashed. Then Voldemort came. He cast the killing curse at me but professor Dumbledore blocked it with part of a statue. They dueled for a few minutes then Voldemort tried to possess me. He got in my head for a few seconds, until I threw him out. The professor talked with Minister Fudge for a minute then he sent me back to the castle with a portkey. That's what happened."

Bones nodded, shocked at the clarity of the description that she had been given, amazed that the students had survived an attack by Voldemort's best Death Eaters, and marveled that they had managed to subdue some of them. She said, "My findings in the case are as follows – Miss Granger, Miss Lovegood, Miss Weasley, Mr. Weasley and Mr. Longbottom, there are no charges against you nor will there be any charges against you with regards to the events of 28 June. You were simply trying to help your friend the best that you could."

Harry sat rigid waiting for the hammer to fall. Director Bones said, "Mr. Potter, you demonstrated a remarkable level of thinking on your feet to lead your friends out of such a predicament. However, you are fined a thousand galleons for inappropriate use of spells. You have a week to pay the fine at which time no further action can be taken against you." She looked at his shabby clothing and asked, "Harry, do you have the means to pay the fine?" In reality, she would pay his fine herself if he even hinted that it would be a hardship.

Harry nodded and replied, "Yes. I can get to Gringotts the day after we get back. I'm sorry, Director."

Bones gave him a slight smile and said, "I'll need each of you to appear sometime in the next month or so as their trials are scheduled." She handed Harry his decree and added "Send this back as soon as you can. Thank you all for your help in bringing these men to justice." They nodded and she continued, "Harry, I'm sorry about your Godfather. Perhaps one day Pettigrew can be brought to justice and we'll at least get his name cleared once and for all."

Harry nodded and she added, "I may have a few more questions for you next week. I'll call you at your Aunt's home if I need to stop by. Okay?"

Harry nodded, a bit surprised that she would know about telephones. Recognizing his expression, she handed each of them her business card. Harry noticed that her cellular telephone number was neatly written on the bottom of the cards that she gave to him and Hermione.

... -- ...

While walking them back to their common room, McGonagall stopped to rest for a moment and quietly told them, "I've never been as proud of five of my Gryffindors as I am right now. Thank you all."

... -- ...

The leaving feast was a loud affair the next evening. The *Daily Prophet* had leaked the story that Voldemort had been sighted and it named the Death Eaters who had been captured. The talk throughout the school was that Potter and the other five had had something to do with their arrests, though the newspaper article hadn't mentioned how they had been captured.

Harry missed the feast, instead spent the time talking with nearly Headless Nick and Luna. Dumbledore had noticed his absence, but hadn't mentioned it. He'd been busy with the seventh years leaving ceremony after the feast, and wasn't able to say anything to Harry that evening.

It was with a heavy heart that Harry and the others boarded the train the next morning. A few hours into the ride, he accidentally knocked Susan Bones over coming out of the loo after being sick. She took his outstretched hand and he helped her up, mumbling, "Sorry, Susan."

She replied, "I'm okay Harry. Are you all right?"

He had his head down and walked back to his compartment.

As she was walking back to her own compartment, her friend Hannah asked, "What's up with him?"

She replied, "Nothing. I just think he's had a really rough week."

Susan and Hannah got off the train a while later and watched as a group of wizards and a younger witch with pink hair met with Harry's Uncle. While they weren't close enough to hear all of the words, it didn't sound like a pleasant conversation. Susan recognized Moody as he had been over to her Auntie's home in the past before he had retired.

The ride back home for Harry was the worst ever. Uncle Vernon looked like he was ready to pop a gasket at any moment, muttering, "The nerve of those effen freaks." From time to time Petunia nervously cast a few glances at Harry in the rear view mirror. Something had obviously happened to set those witches and wizards off at the station. Meanwhile Harry sat stone-faced, staring out the window as if in a daze.

As they pulled onto Privet drive Uncle Vernon shouted, "Take your stuff up to your room by yourself. I don't want to hear a word from you the rest of the evening, you little shite." When they got home and had parked, Vernon got out of the car and slammed the door in anger.

Harry brought Hedwig's cage up to his room and went back to get his trunk. As he set it down on the floor by his bed, Harry heard the door lock behind him. It would be a long summer.

... -- ...

McGonagall looked up from her desk and said, "Welcome back, Mr. Crow. Thank you for reviewing all of those stories while you were away. Be certain to mention the works by Paffy and Fudi." The old scribe nodded and went back to his parchment. He reminded himself to thank the old wizards Tumshie and Kayemshi for their work in developing the spell checker spells. Perhaps a bottle of firewhisky would be in order.

... -- ...

Chapter Two - Freedom

Harry received two letters that night. The first one arrived by owl about midnight. Harry took the over-large letter from the owl's leg, gave her a drink from Hedwig's dish and sent her back on her way.

Harry looked at the seal of the letter, but didn't immediately recognize it. Stamped with black wax, it resembled a galleon, only much smaller. He opened the letter and began reading it.

Mr. Harry James Potter,

You have been named as beneficiary in one of the Wills handled by our estate trust department. Please stop by at your earliest convenience to sign the transfer papers.

Sincerely,

Whipcrack

Director

Gringotts trust

Harry put the letter and the accompanying documents aside and looked at the owl that had just flown outside of his window. He wondered how many times that it had delivered the same bittersweet letters to different people. A few minutes later he was startled by a sudden flash and heartened by a joyful song. The next thing he knew a swan sized phoenix was perched on the end of his bed.

"Hello Fawkes," said Harry, not really surprised to see Dumbledore's personal messenger. The magnificent bird gave Harry an appraising look and dropped a small scroll in front of the teen. Harry unrolled the scroll and read the message.

Harry,

I promised myself that I wouldn't make the same mistakes with you this summer that I made with Sirius. I know that a young man your age doesn't want to be locked up, but you must realize that

reasonable precautions are necessary, as you have acquired many enemies. Fawkes has come up with what might be the ideal solution for you.

Harry was startled as the flash of another phoenix appeared on the foot of his bed next to Fawkes. Slightly more than half the size of Fawkes, the two birds resembled each other. Harry greeted the other bird, saying, "Hello." He held out his hand. The smaller phoenix looked Harry in the eye for nearly a minute as if examining his soul. Apparently it found him worthy and hopped onto Harry's arm. Harry stroked the bird a few times. As he did a feeling of comfort ran through him like drinking a hot beverage on a cold evening. Fawkes looked at the other phoenix and Harry for a few minutes and nudged Dumbledore's note back to Harry.

I believe the phoenix that may have accompanied Fawkes to see you might be related to him. So little is known about phoenixes let alone understood. As I may have mentioned, phoenixes have the ability to instantly transport a person to another place, much like apparition or a portkey. As you have not yet studied apparition, or portkey creation, the services that this young bird could provide you might prove most useful for you this summer. I'm certain that you will show her the kindness and respect that any phoenix would deserve. If you prove worthy to her, in time she may elect to bond with you as Fawkes did with me when I was a younger man.

Harry, I made a terrible mistake by requesting that Sirius remain cooped up in his house for the last year of his life. Please know that if given the choice, he would have chosen to end his life fighting dark wizards. Please recognize that very few people have the opportunity to have their final wish granted. Most men die alone and enfeebled. Please honor Sirius' memory by continuing to do what you can to help others and to live your life to the fullest.

I know that you have continuing business with Amelia Bones and Gringotts this summer. You may also want to visit some of your friends. Please exercise prudence when you are outside your home, and if possible, let one of the Order members know if you need anything. I recommend that you not use the floo network as it could

be monitored, and it may be possible for a witch or wizard with sufficient access rights to intercept a person travelling by floo.

Albus Dumbledore

In truth, Harry was shocked by Dumbledore's letter. He had expected to receive a note from the man insisting that he remain locked indoors, hidden under his bed for the entire summer. Then again, Harry realized that he *was* currently locked in his room; the difference being that Uncle Vernon had locked him in. He smiled at the thought that at least he was on his bed, not under it, and the window hadn't been nailed shut.

'Besides,' thought Harry, *'if he would have pulled that, I'd have told him No Thanks.'*

Harry felt like he suddenly had an unprecedented level of freedom. *'If Uncle Vernon keeps me locked in my room every day...'* The wheels in Harry's mind were spinning with the possibilities.

Harry planned out his first day – a trip to Diagon Alley to get some gold from his vault, convert some of it to pounds sterling, buy some decent clothing, get a few books, pay his fine and the like. The phoenix could give him some freedom. Freedom. "Hey girl," he said quietly, calling her over, "Have you got a name?" She gave him a look that Harry was certain indicated no. "Can I call you Freedom?"

The beautiful bird looked Harry in the eye for almost a minute and nodded her head.

"Brilliant," replied Harry, "I'll also get you a perch tomorrow." With that thought in mind, Harry drifted off to a peaceful sleep.

... -- ...

Harry was awakened the next morning to the sound of Uncle Vernon's melodious voice shouting, "Boy, get down here and make us breakfast."

Harry replied without opening the door, "No thanks. I think I'll just stay in my room for the summer."

In a rage, Vernon replied, "Have it your way, freak!"

With that handled, Harry put on his least hideous castoffs from Dudley, and wore a school robe over them. He put on the Chudley Cannons cap that his buddy Ron had given him for Christmas, not because he liked the team so much, but it would hide his scar somewhat and allow him to blend in a bit better.

As ready as he would be, Harry called the phoenix to him and asked, "I would like to go to Gringotts in London. Can you take me there?"

The little phoenix reminded Harry a bit of Ron's owl, Pig with her enthusiasm. She hopped on Harry's right shoulder, gave a small trill, and in a flash they were in the lobby of Gringotts! Harry was less pleased with himself when he suddenly found himself facing the business end of three of the Goblins' Halberds!

"State your name and your business," demanded one of the goblins.

Harry looked around for a moment, saw that the lobby was nearly empty and slowly took the letter that the goblin had sent him out of his pocket. He carefully handed it to the goblin and replied, "I'm sorry for intruding like this. I meant no harm. Whipcrack had sent me a letter asking that I come see him."

With those words, the guards immediately withdrew their long handled weapons from Harry's face and assumed a much more accommodating demeanor. Harry asked to use the restroom before the meeting. He was pointed to a side corridor that he hadn't noticed before. He noticed several signs outside the various doors – among them were signs reading, *'witches, wizards, goblins and dwarves.'*

... -- ...

After Harry concluded his business with Whipcrack, he went to the teller and asked if he could visit his vault. A goblin called Sidestep took him to his school vault. Harry withdrew three thousand galleons, splitting the gold coins into three equal sacks and went back to the teller to exchange one of the bags for Sterling notes. The teller handed him five bundles of twenty pound notes which Harry carefully stuffed into one of Dudley's old backpacks that he had found in his

room. He took a few of the bills and tucked them into his trouser pocket. At that point, he was ready to leave the bank.

Harry felt the presence of Freedom as he walked outside of the Gringotts. He walked down the street to Madam Malkin's. She greeted him warmly, but had not recognized him. "Good morning, young sir. How can I help you?"

Harry replied that he wanted a summer-weight gray robe.

"Okay, Dear. If you would, please remove your school robes and I'll get you properly measured."

Harry complied, but kept the orange hat on. Madam Malkin frowned a bit when she saw his other things and gently asked, "Perhaps you would also like a summer-weight shirt or two?"

Harry replied, "Yes please, and a new pair of jeans and trainers too, if you have them?"

Madam Malkin gave him a small smile and replied, "Of course, Dear." One thing led to another and soon Harry had a new set of clothing and shoes. He paid Madam Malkin, thanked her and wore them with him, leaving his old things in the store's dustbin.

Feeling like he looked a bit older out of his student robes, Harry decided to go to the ministry building first; then look for a few books and a perch for Freedom. He walked further down the street then took the side street past Fortescue's to get to the entrance.

Inside, Harry gave his wand to Eric at the visitor's guard desk. Eric ran it through a scanner, pronounced it acceptable and handed it back to Harry along with a visitor badge. Harry walked by the ruined fountain that Dumbledore had used against Voldemort a week earlier. A large *Out of Order* sign was posted hanging from the arm of one of the broken statues. Harry felt a flash of guilt, but realized that he hadn't started the fight the previous week; rather he helped end it. He got in the lift and pressed the button to take second level.

Harry got out and found the double door that had a sign next to it, *Division of Magical Law Enforcement*. Harry opened the door and

walked in. A receptionist, who was only a few years older than himself, smiled at him and asked, "Can I help you?"

Not knowing exactly what to say, "Harry replied, "Madam Bones had asked me to come see her. I told her I would be in today."

The receptionist replied, "I'll tell her that you're here..." She looked at his visitor badge, and finished in surprise, "Mr. Potter."

A minute later, the receptionist came back and said, "Director Bones will see you now, Mr. Potter. Can I get you a cupp'a tea?"

Harry smiled and replied, "Thank you, Miss..."

"Bell. Randi Bell. Katie's my younger sister. I was a sixth year when you first made the team. The years have been kind to you, Harry." She handed Harry a cup and carefully poured him a half cup so he wouldn't spill any as he took it with him, and opened the door to Director Bones' office for him.

"Thank you, Randi," replied Harry.

Bones stood to greet him and said, "Good morning, Harry. I didn't mean that you had to come this morning, but I'm pleased to see you. Did you have a difficult time getting here?"

"It was no trouble, Director." Harry didn't know exactly what to do, so he pulled the bag of coins out of his backpack."

"Please, Harry," replied Bones, realizing that his inexperience was getting in the way of decorum. "You can pay your fine down on the third level. Are you certain that it's not a problem?" She really didn't know his financial circumstances, and didn't want to cause a hardship for the good-hearted teen.

Harry replied, "I have the means, and I realize that I was wrong. I don't mind. I should get going." Harry looked at the rather large stack of parchments on her desk and realized that she was a very busy woman.

Bones smiled and replied, "I'll admit that your adventure did cause a lot of parchment to be filled out, but I'll gladly read through a small mountain of forms to see another eleven Death Eaters off of the street. You did well that night, Harry. I want you to always remember that. Okay?"

Harry nodded and stood to leave. Bones said, "Third level. Turn right. The door will have a sign that reads '*forms, levies and assessments.*' Just hand the attendant your form and they'll take care of it. Enjoy your summer, Harry." She shook his hand.

Harry nodded and closed the door behind him. He handed his empty cup back to Randi and said, "Please say 'hi' from me to Katie if you see her. It was nice to see you again."

Randi replied, "You too, Mr. Potter. Thanks."

Harry made his way down to the third floor, turned right as he had been directed to and found the door marked 'Forms, Levees, and Assessments. Harry walked in and noticed that there were hundreds of forms on the different racks – Apparation permits, portkey creation permits, flobberworm breeding permits, and the like. After a moment, one caught his eye – Declaration of head of house. Harry picked up a copy and found a few others that looked interesting; then went up to the counter. He handed the attendant his fine declaration and the sack of gold. The attendant looked at the form, read it carefully, meticulously counted the coins and handed Harry a receipt without saying a word.

As Harry walked out the door he decided that he would come back another day and look through the different forms again. He silently wondered if the attendant might have been related to one of the flobberworms.

... -- ...

As Harry walked out the door back onto the street, he found a small bookstore. Walking inside for a moment, he found two books that caught his eye – *Wizarding law for young wizards* and *Investing in the muggle world*. Harry decided to get both and took them to the counter where he paid for them. At the next shop he found a perch for

Freedom. It was awkward and rather heavy to carry, but Harry was certain that his new friend would like it.

He walked into a small shop that served lunches and bought an order of fish and chips, a large packet of biscuits and two bottles of butterbeer for take-away. Before leaving, he used the restroom then walked out the door and thought of Freedom. A moment later, the little phoenix landed on his shoulder and they disappeared in a flash. When Harry opened his eyes, he was back in his room! *'This is so much better than portkeys,'* he thought to himself.

... -- ...

One hundred and eighty miles to the northwest outside the city of Blackpool, Severus Snape was being tortured mercilessly. The Dark Lord had lost his best and brightest servants the week before and decided to take it out on the first person that he saw that day. Snape had the bad judgement of choosing that morning to stop in and pick up his pay envelope. An hour later, the greasy haired potions master crawled away from the manor, realizing that his chances of fathering children had all but been eliminated that morning. Naturally, he transferred the blame for the whole incident away from himself, and onto his least favorite teenaged wizard.

... -- ...

Uncle Vernon arrived home from work that evening in an especially foul mood. Like the potions master, he decided to take his frustration out on his least favorite teenaged wizard. After dinner had been eaten, he went up the stairs, and was surprised to see that the door was still locked. He shouted through the locked door, "Potter get out here. The car needs washing."

Not needing any food or anything that his nasty uncle might have in store for him, Harry answered, "I'm fine in here. Thanks anyway."

Dursley replied, "Have it your way, you ungrateful brat. Stay in there the entire holiday if you want. You're not getting any more food from us."

Not certain if his Uncle would make his way into the room or not, Harry quickly chucked the food wrappers and empty butterbeer bottles into one of his empty clothing drawers and shrugged his shoulders. He couldn't remember having eaten a better meal during any of his holiday stays.

... -- ...

That evening he received two more owls. The first was from his friend Hermione wishing him well and letting him know that she would be on holiday to Serbia with her parents for a month. Harry was happy for her, but knew that she would be unable to write him for most of the summer.

The second was from Ron letting him know that Ron and Ginny had been invited to stay with his brother Charlie in Romania for a month. As with Hermione, Harry was glad for his friends, but would miss them. He didn't think that the little phoenix could possibly go so far. Besides he had no idea where Romania or Serbia really were.

'Oh well,' Harry thought to himself. *'I can always go to Diagon Alley a few times a week, Hogsmeade once in a while, and maybe venture into muggle London a time or two.'* He penned three notes and asked Hedwig to deliver them – one to Hermione wishing her a good holiday, a similar note to Ron and Ginny, and a note to the Order letting them know that he was fine.

After Hedwig had left, Harry put most of his extra gold and the sterling notes under the loose floorboard. He read his new book for a while and then went to sleep.

... -- ...

Harry woke refreshed the next day and noticed that the little phoenix was making a soft trilling song. The individual notes were difficult to make out, but overall, it had a very calming effect. Harry had slept soundly and hadn't had any horrible nightmares for the previous two nights.

Since the day before had gone so well, Harry decided to try it again. Freedom flew him just inside Diagon Alley, to the alleyway behind the

Leaky Cauldron. Wearing another set of old castoffs and the Chudley Cannons hat, Harry walked through the dingy bar. No one noticed him. He removed the cap as he left the bar and bought another, from a street vendor for tourists, that said *London*. He bought another set of casual clothing and a dressier set before going back to the Leaky Cauldron. Stopping for ice cream, Harry was pleased to see Susan Bones and her friend Hannah sitting in the back. They waved him over without shouting his name and Harry walked over to greet them. "Hi Hannah, hi Susan. How are you?"

"We're fine," replied Hannah. "Would you like an ice cream, Harry?"

Harry smiled at the two witches and said, "Thanks."

Susan asked, "What brings you to Diagon Alley, Harry. I've never seen you here before."

He replied, "I needed to get some new clothes. My aunt usually tries to get me to wear my cousin's old things, but he's about a thousand pounds heavier than I am so I decided to get some things of my own." He tried to make light of it, but Susan felt bad for her friend.

"Auntie gets me my things, but she usually picks them out for me. I think that she still sees me as being eleven."

Harry glanced at Susan. She had given up the pigtails from her first few years at Hogwarts and had grown her strawberry blonde hair well past her shoulders. Without her school robes on it was obvious that she was curvier than Hannah and had pretty blue eyes. Harry met her gaze and replied, "None of us are eleven anymore."

He liked talking with the two witches. Neither of them pressed him to confess his deep feelings of guilt regarding Sirius, or tried to act like stupid fangirls. They simply had a nice time together. Harry thanked them for the ice cream, picked up another order of takeaway dinner and walked back to the alleyway behind the Leaky Cauldron. Moments later, Freedom had transported Harry back to his bedroom at Privet Drive.

Harry finished his take away dinner and stuffed the wrappers in the drawer.

... -- ...

McGonagall tutted, "Two chapters and only the merest mention of a single death. Mr. Crow, have you turned over a new leaf?"

The old scribe gripped his pen and sniggered. He'd just read a story by CTS and seen enough violence for one day. Besides, he knew what was to come.

Chapter Three - Folkestone

Harry received two letters that evening. The first arrived back with Hedwig. Hermione had attached a note on her leg. Harry opened it up.

Dear Harry,

Thanks for the quick reply. We are leaving tomorrow. I received a note from Director Bones advising me that the trials were going to be scheduled for the first week in August. Mum saw it and started asking a lot of questions that I was fairly certain she really didn't want to know answers for. I told her that some men had been arrested at the Ministry building while we were there and that we were possible witnesses. I know that wasn't the Gryffindor answer, but if they knew the situation, I'm certain that they'd probably send me to Brazil or someplace even further away to keep me safe. I guess that's their job.

Speaking of keeping safe, I probably need to remind you the same. I'll write you again in a month.

Love from,

Hermione

Harry smiled at the letter. It had less work direction than he'd feared from his bushy haired friend. He hoped that she would have a happy, safe trip.

He looked at the second letter with some surprise. He didn't recognize the owl and the handwriting on the outside of the letter was very neatly written. He opened up the letter and began to read.

Dear Harry,

I suppose that you get dozens of letters every day, but I did want to let you know that I had a great time visiting with you this morning. You are a great guy and I was glad to get the opportunity to get to know you a bit better. I really hate the different houses at school. I wish that each year had their own common room and was able to interact together on a regular basis, but the founders had other ideas.

You didn't say that you had taken a summer job, and I don't know if you have other plans, but if you would like, Hannah and I could make you lunch tomorrow. Her parents have a beach house by Folkestone and the weather is supposed to be sunny all day. You could bring a swimsuit if you want. The beach there is nice and we could visit. It wouldn't take you too long to get there with the Knight Bus. Auntie said that you might not have easy access to a floo connection. Please let me know if you can't go, otherwise, we'll plan on seeing you at eleven. The address is 29 Lower Sandgate Road, Folkestone.

Susan

A smile crept onto Harry's face as he read the letter. Harry had never had a day at the beach before, but he'd seen pictures in one of Aunt Petunia's magazines and it sounded like fun. The thought of getting to know Hannah and Susan better sounded good to him. He realized that she was right about the houses being divisive rather than team building. A frown crept onto his face as he realized that he didn't own any swimming trunks, but he decided that he could purchase some in the morning.

... -- ...

Meanwhile, Dumbledore was thinking about Harry, hoping that the young phoenix would eventually bond with him. Fawkes had been such a comfort to him in his own life. He wished the same for Harry. Dumbledore had heard that Harry had visited the Ministry. He must have just missed Harry when he went to visit Amelia and Scrimgeour himself.

While he was pleased that unlike Fudge, Scrimgeour didn't have his head in the sand regarding Voldemort, Dumbledore strongly disagreed with Scrimgeour's plan to make Harry the poster boy of the struggle. He knew that Harry would react badly to the publicity, and it would focus too much of Tom's attention on him. While Harry may in fact be *the chosen one*, it would do no good to have his photo plastered all over the *Daily Prophet* describing him as the next savior of the wizarding world. Dumbledore had expressed his strong disagreement of the idea, but as he was not Harry's parent or magical guardian, he had little real authority in his life, and was fairly certain

that Scrimgeour would try to contact Harry within the week. Dumbledore had never seen Black's Will and didn't know who, if anyone, that he might have named to assume responsibility for Harry after he died.

... -- ...

Harry woke early the next morning. Uncle Vernon didn't say a word to him through the door, which was fine with Harry. Harry wondered what he had done to deserve being hated so badly by his Aunt and Uncle. He liked to think that if the circumstances had been reversed, that his parents would have taken in Dudley, and treated them as one of their own children. After everyone had left, Harry asked Freedom to flash him into the bathroom on the other side of the locked door. Harry showered and stuffed his food wrappers and butterbeer bottles into the bottom of the dustbin outside.

Harry asked Freedom to flash him behind the little mall that was nearby. He purchased a small cooler, and some beachwear, then went to the alleyway behind the Leaky Cauldron where he purchased a case of butterbeers and a good take-away breakfast. Five minutes later, he was back in his room, ready to go. He placed half of the butterbeers in his closet then packed a dozen with him in his cooler and stuffed the swimwear in his old backpack.

... -- ...

Harry thought of the address and asked Freedom to take him there. The little phoenix hopped on his shoulder and a moment later he was standing outside the door of a blue beachhouse. More than a bit nervous, Harry gently knocked on the door. Hannah's mum answered the door and said, "Good morning. You must be Harry. Please come in. I'll tell the girls that you're here." Harry followed her inside.

Mrs. Abbott couldn't have been a greater opposite from his aunt – curvy, pretty, friendly - and she seemed to be glad that he was in her house. A few minutes later, Hannah and Susan came down the stairs, and in unison said, "Hi Harry." Hannah asked, "Is that your phoenix? He's adorable."

Harry smiled and replied, "She is beautiful. She's not so much mine as staying with me. Her name's Freedom."

Both girls came up and gently stroked the beautiful little phoenix. After a minute, she gave a trill that sent a shiver of happiness through the young witches.

"You can get changed in there Harry," said Susan pointing to one of the bedrooms. "We'll wait for you."

Harry went into the bedroom and closed the door. He put on his swimsuit, Cannons cap and a gray tee-shirt. His swimsuit was emerald green and came almost down to his knees. He opened the door and said, "I'm ready."

"Let's go outside," said Susan smiling at his combination of colors. She and Hannah were wearing white terry cloth robes and sandals.

"Lunch will be ready in about an hour," announced Mrs. Abbott. "Have fun."

They walked out the back. The Abbotts owned a few hundred feet of beachfront, and what they had was secluded by walls of large rocks that had been placed on either side of their property line. The sound of the surf was mesmerizing to Harry. He turned to look at the witches who had placed three large towels on the sand that they could lie on. Hannah was undoing the tie on her robe and smiled at Harry as she took it off.

Harry gulped.

Hannah was wearing, Hannah wasn't wearing... Harry's mind seemed to be stuck. Suddenly he was glad that he was wearing loose boarding shorts. "Harry, could you help me?" Harry turned to notice Susan who had on a modest ice blue bikini that seemed to match her eyes. She held out a bottle of sunscreen lotion.

"What would you like me to do?" asked Harry who was amazed that he could string an entire sentence together.

“Hold out your hand,” answered Susan. She squeezed about a teaspoon of the sunblock oil onto the palm of Harry’s outstretched hand. “Can you put about this much each on Hannah’s and my backs?” She laid face down on the beach blanket.

Harry knelt on the towel beside her and put a dab of the oil on each of her shoulders. With his other hand, he moved her hair to the side. It felt like silk. “Breathe, Harry,” Susan whispered to him. Harry nodded and placed another dab at the base of her neck. Her neck... The truth of the matter was that Harry had never been... had never seen so much... had never felt... “Don’t forget to rub it in,” whispered Susan. She’d originally assumed that Harry would have had much more experience with girls, given his fame and all, but quickly realized that exactly the opposite was probably the case. She wasn’t trying to take advantage of him or tease him mercilessly, and wanted to be his friend, to have him as a friend.

Her skin felt so smooth, so firm, so warm as he moved his hands along her shoulders. After a minute, he began with the oil that he’d placed on her neck. His hands lingered for a moment on the base of her neck and then along the sides. “That feels nice, Harry. Don’t forget the rest.”

How could he forget the rest? Her entire back was right there. He put a little more oil on his hand and worked his way down, fixated on the loops of the bow that she’d tied. He was careful not to get any on the fabric. He put a little more on his hand and worked his way down her back. He could feel each rib.

After an eternity, he had finished; rather reached the top of her bottom. Susan said, “Thanks, Harry. That felt nice. Put a little on Hannah then get your shirt off and I’ll put some on you.” Harry looked over and Hannah was on a towel on the other side of him, face down. She’d closed her eyes when he looked over, but had been watching them closely. She could tell that her friend Susan liked Harry.

She really didn’t know anything about him other than what her friend Neville had mentioned from time to time in Herbology as they chatted away, potting and trimming the various plants together. Like Susan; she’d assumed that he’d probably been with most of the Gryffindor

girls, but now she wasn't so sure either. His hands felt strong, but they weren't overly rough. As with Susan, he was very tentative on where he put the oil, careful not to let his fingers wander. When he'd done as much as he'd done with Susan, she purred a bit and said, "Thanks, Harry. That was nice."

"Your turn, Harry," said Susan, who was sitting up. "Face down on the towel." After a moment, she added, "Don't forget your shirt." Harry complied. His skin was absolutely white as if he'd never had his shirt off outside before. She noticed several scars of various sizes on his back and a smaller one along his side. "How did you pick up such a collection of scars, Harry?" Her voice was soft and inquiring, not demanding like Hermione's.

Harry thought for a few seconds and replied, "Uncle, dragon, rat. They're just there, I guess. I'll put my shirt back on if they bother..." He started to get up, but she gently held him down.

"They don't bother me, Harry. They're a part of you; who you are, who you've become. I just was curious." Her hands continued on his shoulders. Off to the side, Freedom trilled a few notes as she took to flight. Susan watched the little phoenix soar and glide over the surf then swoop down to snatch a fish that was swimming too near the surface. She turned her attention back to Harry and said, "I'm glad you could come today."

"It's really nice out here," replied Harry. "I've never been to the ocean before or seen a beach."

In a soft but inquiring voice Susan asked, "Harry, how could you live on an island your whole life and never have been to the ocean?"

"I might have been when I was a baby," replied Harry. "I don't remember. My aunt and uncle always left me with a neighbor anytime they went on holiday. Well, there was one night just before my eleventh birthday when I got my school letter, but it was dark and raining. Not like...this." She gave his arm a squeeze of affirmation. He continued, saying, "They took me to London a few times when they were going shopping for Dudley, but mostly I think so that I could carry the packages. Then I got to take the train to Hogwarts. It was brilliant."

Susan squeezed his arm again and said, "It really is."

Too soon, it was time for lunch. Despite the girls' offer, Hannah's mum made a wonderful lunch. The girls had put their terrycloth robes back on. As they were eating, Hannah's mum asked, "How long have you been acquainted with your phoenix, Harry?"

"Actually just a few days. I think she may be a hatchling from Professor Dumbledore's phoenix, Fawkes. He brought her to me one night."

"Cool," said Hannah. "She's gorgeous."

"She is at that," replied Mrs. Abbot. "May I hold her?"

"I can't answer that," Ma'am, replied Harry. He looked at the little phoenix for a minute and she nodded and hopped onto Mrs. Abbot's shoulder then sang a note.

Her legs felt like they'd turned to jelly and Becky Abbot was glad that she'd been sitting. Hannah sniggered and Susan looked out the window, biting her lip to avoid laughing. Becky had a faraway look on her face, then turned to Harry and said, "She's an amazing being. Thank you for showing her to me."

After lunch, the teens went back outside. Hannah was sunning herself again and suggested that Susan show Harry the water. He wasn't a swimmer in any sense of the word, but they went in a bit, then took a walk along the waterline looking at the sand, the water and the shells. Harry asked, "Where do you live, Susan?"

Susan replied, "Auntie has a home by Welshpool in central Wales. It has a big back garden, some trees and a pool. We live there with Smidgen, Auntie's house elf. Hannah's mum and my mum were best friends at school. My parents were killed a month before yours. Auntie took me in. I guess that I'm pretty lucky. She's always been really good to me." She bent to pick up a shell and said, "That witch that you tried to capture, Bellatrix Lestrange killed them. Auntie said that Mum and Dad had never done anything to hurt anyone. They just ran a greenhouse." Her eyes glistened from remembering the long buried thoughts.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry, who didn’t know what he was supposed to do other than listen.

“Don’t be sorry Harry,” encouraged Susan. “It’s just a part of who I am, like your scars.” She gave his arm a squeeze and finished saying, “Some scars are just more visible, that’s all.”

They reached the edge of the rocks and decided to turn around. Harry saw that Hannah was sitting up. Susan noticed him looking and asked, “Are you OK with her? She hardly ever wears a top when she’s out in back, but I’ll ask her to put one on if it bothers you.”

Harry replied, “I’ve really never seen any girls in a swimsuit before, let alone out of one. It’s really... they’re really... quite nice.” He looked at her and a moment later they smiled, smirked and each had a laugh.”

Susan said, “You’re a nice guy Harry. I like you.”

Harry didn’t say anything for a moment, collected his thoughts and said, “Thanks Susan. I like you too.” They walked back. Hannah had mercifully put on her terrycloth robe and was reading. Harry passed them each a butterbeer.

Hannah said, “So how’d you like the water, Harry?”

He replied, “It’s a lot warmer than I’d imagined it would be.”

She asked, “Do you go swimming very often?”

Harry replied, “Never, well once I guess, but I’d taken Gillyweed.”

Susan asked, “Do you mean to say that you dove into that lake in February for the tournament to rescue those people and you’d never gone swimming before?”

“I s’pose.”

Hannah shook her head in amazement then asked, “What was it like down there?”

“Wet.” The girls looked at each other and began giggling. Harry knew that his answer sounded stupid, but he continued, “At first it was cold; then the Gillyweed started working. The water seemed cool, but as I went deeper, it got darker. I saw some Grindylows like Professor Lupin had shown us. The Merpeople live pretty far out into the lake. It’s quite deep. They live in stone houses and carry spears.”

“I’ve never seen a mermaid before,” admitted Susan.

“The ones in the lake aren’t like the one painted in the prefects bathroom,” replied Harry. “The ones I saw were gray and...”

“Nasty,” said Hannah, scrunching her nose.

“That about covers it,” admitted Harry.

“Do you have plans for tomorrow?” asked Susan.

Harry thought for a second and answered, “Not really. How about you?”

“I need to go to Gringotts,” announced Hannah.

“I should probably buy some books,” replied Harry, “but that won’t take all day.”

“Let’s go out for pizza for lunch,” suggested Susan.

They went back inside. Harry saw Hannah’s mum sitting reading a book. He asked, “Mrs. Abbott, what does a head of house certification do?”

Becky thought for a moment and said, “I suppose both you and Susan could go to the ministry, fill out a form and claim your head of house positions. You would have adult status within the wizarding world, and you would be able to claim title to any property that either of parents left you if you are at least sixteen. Susan, your parents didn’t have much. They were so young when they died. I believe that Amelia would know the current situation of your trust. Harry, the Gringotts trust department could probably answer your financial

questions much better than I could. I didn't know your mother well at all, but I think your father was pretty well off."

"Let's meet at the Gringotts lobby at eleven," suggested Susan. "You two can get your business done at the bank, we can look for a book, then get some lunch."

"I should get going," said Harry. "Thanks for lunch, Mrs. Abbott. Thanks Hannah. Thanks Susan."

"Bye Harry," they all replied.

"Thanks for coming," said, Mrs. Abbott. "It was nice to meet you. Are you certain that you can get home all right?"

Harry nodded. He thought of Freedom. A few seconds later, the little phoenix flew onto his shoulder and as he was saying "Bye," they disappeared in a flash of flame.

... -- ...

As Harry was reading his book that evening eight people were thinking about him – Susan Bones, her Aunt, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, Rufus Scrimgeour, Hermione Granger, Severus Snape and the man once known as Tom Riddle. It would be a summer that none of them would forget.

... -- ...

Harry tossed and turned that evening as he slept. Images of flame cutter spells and his godfather falling through the arch filled his head soon after he had shut his eyes. Sensing his distress, the little phoenix softly sang throughout the evening. Soon his dreams shifted to that of a mermaid - a strawberry blonde, blue-eyed mermaid.

Harry clung tightly to his pillow as Hedwig looked on in amusement. He woke to find two owls waiting patiently outside his window. The first was from Remus Lupin. Harry opened the envelope and read,

Harry,

It was good to hear from you, if only briefly. Minerva gave us the essence of the depositions that the six of you gave to Director Bones. Words cannot describe the pride that I felt for the six of you as you worked together to get yourselves out of a bad situation. Given similar circumstances, I cannot imagine any other six students that would have done as well. She also briefed us on the DA group that you and Hermione had helped form to give others some practical experience. Providing others with the tools to help them protect themselves, or others, saves lives just as certainly as if you were there yourself. I hope that you will consider keeping the group going next term whether it is officially sanctioned or not.

Keep in mind that life at Hogwarts will be quite different next term. There will be no hiding behind the illusion that all is well within the wizarding world. The junior Death Eaters parents have been found out for the murders that they are. Some students may have already taken the mark by the time that they return, while others may still be considering what type of lives that they want to live. I would encourage you and your friends to reach out and try to build bridges of friendships with those from the other houses. They have much to offer.

Harry smiled to himself as he read this part. He looked at the rest.

I would like to visit with you sometime if you are willing and have the time. Please let me know if Saturday morning at nine would work for you.

Regards,

Remus

Harry recalled that it was Friday morning and he had plans with Susan and Hannah, but nothing arranged for Saturday. He grabbed a piece of paper and wrote back,

Remus,

I would be happy to meet with you on Saturday morning. I'm not certain where you live, and my relatives would not welcome you (or

any living being that knew me for that matter) gracing their door. How about Gringotts? I will meet you there.

Harry

He stuffed the paper into an envelope, sealed it, and attached it to the owl's leg. A moment later, she flew out the window. He opened the second letter. It was from Professor McGonagall.

Dear Harry,

While listening to you and your friends explain the events of the last term to MLE Director Bones, I came to realize how badly that I'd let you down. The six of you exemplified what bravery means and placed your very lives on the line to do what was right rather than what was easy. I gave you poor advice last year to kowtow to that evil witch's inappropriate demands. I apologize to you Harry and hope that you can continue to consider me a person worthy of your friendship in spite of my failings.

Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Harry reread the letter to be certain that he understood exactly what she had been apologizing for. He had a lot of unresolved guilt himself over the DA and getting Dumbledore sacked. At the same time he had an equal amount of unresolved anger over his head of house bending to Umbridge's illegal demands. Harry decided that the best thing to do was to put it behind him and build bridges rather than walls. He picked up another piece of paper and wrote a reply.

Dear Professor McGonagall,

No apology is necessary. We survived her term in office and are positioned to do better in the future. I believed that the DA group was a good idea last year. I believe that having it again this year may help save lives. As such, I would ask that you help sponsor it as a recognized club.

Please don't feel bad over the things that she may have done. They are behind us.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter

Harry found that his forgiving Professor McGonagall made him feel better about himself. He read some more from his *Wizarding Law for Young Wizards* book. From it, he concluded that there might be some significant advantages for him to be formally recognized as the head of the Potter household. He wondered if Whipcraack or Susan's Aunt could help advise him.

... -- ...

"Good work, Mr. Crow," announced Minerva. "For a minute, I was worried that you would find yourself outside of the rules of decency. Regardless, I will have a talk with Pomona regarding swimwear. In my day..."

"One can only hope," thought the balding scribe as he added Sta-bil to the tank of his old bike and considered the possibilities. He considered the saying, "Half a swimsuit is better than one," and smirked to himself over things to come.

McGonagall gave him a stern look and asked, "On a different subject Mr. Crow, perhaps you could recommend another tale for me to look over while you pen your next chapter?"

Still pondering the smallest of bikini bottoms, he took a piece of parchment from her desk and elegantly penned the words, *The Summer of Change – Lordddwar*. He liked what he'd read, and hoped he'd see more from the scribe very soon.

... -- ...

Chapter Four – Fortescue's

Harry met the two witches outside Gringotts. He dropped off the paper that Whipcrack had asked him to look over with one of the counter goblins. Hannah had to pick up some papers from her family vault, and Susan wanted to get some galleons from her vault. She asked Harry, "Do you want to ride in the cart with me?"

Harry thought that riding in the little carts in the dark along a winding track with Susan sounded like a good idea. He smiled and said, "If you don't mind, I'd love to."

They went in one cart and Hannah went in a different one with another goblin. Their goblin led them to a cart and pointed to the seat in the back end. He directed, "Sit here, please." Harry helped Susan into the cart and sat next to her. The goblin stood at the other end facing forward. He said, "3210," and something in gobbledegook and the cart started. As the cart went along the winding turns and Susan was pressed against him from time to time, Harry decided that cart rides were a very enjoyable means of transportation. After a few minutes, the cart stopped and the goblin got out and said, "Key please."

Susan touched Harry's arm and asked, "Can you help me out?"

Harry got out and held his hand out for Susan to hold onto. She did, though it was obvious that she had no trouble getting out unassisted. Harry wasn't certain if he was supposed to go to her vault with her or glance inside to see what was there. Susan sensed his confusion and said, "Come with me Harry. It's only a bit of gold, not a state secret."

He walked with her to her vault and the goblin opened the door for her. It was a smaller vault than Harry's, closer in size to the Weasley vault, but there was a small pile of perhaps a thousand or so galleons inside it. Susan counted fifty out and placed them in her bag. When she was done, she announced, "I'm ready. Thank you."

They got back into the cart while the goblin resealed the vault door. Too soon they were back in the lobby. They both said, "Thank you," to the driver and waited a minute for Hannah.

... -- ...

They walked through the Leaky Cauldron and out into muggle London, looking at the sights and sounds. On a whim, Harry bought them tickets for one of the open top double decker tour buses. They rode around the city, laughing, and just being teenagers on holiday. By one, they were hungry and found a pizza restaurant to eat at.

After they sat down and ordered, Hannah asked, "What do you think about Fudge getting sacked?"

Harry replied, "He caused me a lot of trouble last summer when I protected myself and my cousin against a couple of dementors. He gave Riddle a year's head start by ignoring the situation."

Hannah asked, "What do you mean, Harry? Who's Riddle?"

In a low voice Harry replied, "Voldemort's real name is Tom Riddle. He's about Hagrid's age. They were in school together. Riddle opened the Chamber of Secrets when he was a student and set a basilisk on another student. She died and Hagrid got expelled because Riddle pinned the blame on him. You know her as Moaning Myrtle. I was there, that night, when Peter Pettigrew helped get Voldemort's body back. Pettigrew murdered Cedric on Voldemort's order. We duelled and I was able to get away. When I got back with Cedric's body, I told Fudge and Dumbledore what had happened, and as many of the thirty Death Eaters' names as I could remember. Fudge blew the whole thing off as a lie, because he didn't want to hear it. There's no telling how many supporters he's been able to recruit in the last year or how many people he's had murdered because Fudge didn't bother to make plans to fight the Death Eaters or warn people that they were out attacking people again." Harry didn't feel the need to mention that Wormtail helped Voldemort get his body back by stealing his blood.

Susan flinched at his words realizing that the witches and wizards who worked for her Aunt would need to become part of the solution to a very large problem. She wondered how much of this her Aunt knew and what she was doing about it. She asked, "Harry, who knows about all of this?"

Not wanting to reveal information about the Order, Harry replied, "Us, a few students, Professor Dumbledore and whomever he chose to tell as well as Fudge and whomever he chose to tell. Oh, and all of the kids of the Death Eaters. Malfoy started bragging about it on the train ride home a year ago."

Susan and Hannah sat there in silence for a minute reflecting on his words. Harry was frustrated that he'd spoiled a fun time by being so serious. Fortunately their pizza came and in truth they were famished. Though very thin, Harry decided that Hannah could give Ron a run for his money with respect to eating. Susan obviously was aware of her friend's habit. Her eyes met Harry's and they each smiled at the shared thought.

Harry asked, "Susan, what classes are you planning on taking next term?"

She considered her answer for a moment and replied, "Herbology, Potions, Charms, Transfiguration and Arithmancy. Hannah, how about you?"

Hannah replied, "I'm going to take Arithmancy, Runes, Charms, Herbology and Transfiguration. What about you, Harry?"

In truth, he hadn't thought about it other than the brief conversation that he'd had with McGonagall that Umbitch had ruined. In reality, he'd probably do whatever Professor Dumbledore suggested. He replied, "I'm not certain. I guess I'll ask the Professor for his advice."

Hannah grumbled, "He never talks to me. I think he's said about ten words to me in five years."

Not wanting to get wrapped up in a discussion about Dumbledore, Harry asked, "What about defense?"

Susan looked at Hannah for a second who replied, "It's been kind of a joke. The professor in the first year went missing. Lockhart seemed to be spending most of his time bragging and trying to talk the seventh year witches out of their knickers. Professor Lupin seemed okay, but turned out to have a pretty serious disease. Professor Moody gave me a running case of the creeps. The bint that we had this last year

was worse than worthless. Honestly Harry, the only good defense teacher we've had has been you." Susan nodded in agreement.

While Hannah's knowledge of some of the darker details was limited, Harry couldn't disagree with the essence of her statement. Susan said, "I heard a rumor that that man wasn't even Professor Moody."

Harry replied, "He wasn't. He was Barty Crouch Junior, a Death Eater. He'd kept Moody trapped in his own trunk all year so he could keep impersonating him. He made the portkey that took Cedric and me to the graveyard. He was a major embarrassment to Fudge, and he had him kissed by the dementors without being properly questioned by the Aurors."

Susan frowned for a moment and commented, "It's hard to say if he did that out of stupidity, a false sense of pride, or an intentional cover-up."

Harry continued, "After the tournament, Crouch took me back to his office to kill me. He started bragging about how he'd set up the portkey to get me to the graveyard as part of a plan to get Voldemort's body back. Just as he was going to try to kill me, Professor Dumbledore blew down the door to Crouch's office. Crouch was given Veritaserum and confessed to having set the plan up with Pettigrew, capturing the real Moody, tricking the cup into spitting out my name, murdering his father, and casting Imperius on Victor; all ultimately under Voldemort's orders. Fudge may have thought that I was an attention-seeking liar, but he had an escaped supposedly dead Death Eater in custody who had just confessed to aiding in a huge plan to get Voldemort back to power and the names of over a dozen Death Eaters. It's not like I made them up. Loads of people saw them at the world cup."

Susan replied, "It probably had a lot to do with his ties to Mr. Malfoy. Auntie might know better, but he may have helped get Fudge into office originally. Let's get back to Diagon Alley and look at books."

Harry paid for lunch and they walked out the door. Susan touched his arm and said, "Thanks Harry. I'll get us some ice cream when we get to Fortescue's."

Harry smiled and said, "My pleasure. Lead on." They were less than a mile from the Leaky Cauldron and decided to walk, rather than get back on the bus. Hannah and Susan were a step ahead, and Harry decided that following along with the two pretty witches was very easy on the eyes. They walked and talked as they went.

Hannah opened the door to the Leaky Cauldron and said, "Hi, Tom."

The old barkeeper looked up and smiled at her. "Good day, Miss Abbott. It's nice to see you." He nodded to Susan and Harry who had a slight smirk on his face. The three of them passed through the door out the back. Susan tapped the bricks and a few seconds later the archway had been opened. As they stepped through, it happened.

Harry heard the explosion halfway up the street. He looked up and the front of Fortescue's and the sidewalk tables had blown up. Bits of brick and glass started raining down on them. He heard the little phoenix cry out and a moment later she was diving down. Harry quickly took Susan and Hannah's hands in his and a moment later the three of them were in Harry's little room.

... -- ...

"What happened?" asked Hannah who hadn't been paying attention.

"Harry's little phoenix saved us," said Susan, trembling.

Harry looked over to Hannah and noticed that she had been cut pretty badly on the neck and hadn't yet noticed. He grabbed a shirt that was on his bed and held it tightly to her neck. He said, "Susan, call your Aunt."

She stepped to the door, but it was locked. Harry whipped out his wand, but Susan had beat him and said, "Alohamora." All of the locks that Uncle Vernon had used snapped open.

Harry said, "The phone's down in the kitchen. Stun them if you have to."

Fortunately, no one else was home at the time. A minute later, Amelia Bones and a mediwitch were at the front door. Susan let them in and

the found Harry holding a blood soaked rag over a barely conscious Hannah Abbott.

“What happened?” asked the mediwitch as she reached into her bag to get a blood restorative potion.

Susan said, “We were walking to Fortescue’s when we heard an explosion. Harry’s phoenix grabbed us and took us here. Hannah must have got hit by a piece of glass.”

“Hold her head upright, Mr. Potter, like that. Keep the pressure on her neck. Good.” She poured a pint of the clear liquid down Hannah’s throat then another. Hannah started to gag and the mediwitch said, “Release the bandage.” As Harry did, blood gushed from the cut, but the mediwitch had her wand out and rubbed it along the cut several times. Each time the wound became slightly smaller. After a minute, the bleeding had stopped.

The mediwitch said, “Hold her head up again, Mr. Potter.” She took another bottle of blood restorative out and had Hannah drink half of it. Hannah’s eyes drooped and the mediwitch said, “She’ll need to sleep for half an hour. Please excuse us, Mr. Potter. I need to get her checked for any other injuries.”

While the Mediwitch was working on Hannah, Amelia was glancing around Harry’s room. She noticed the shabby furniture in the otherwise showroom home and the different take-away wrappers that were in the dustbin. She said, “Harry, let’s go downstairs. Susan, maybe you can be of some help to Mediwitch Larson.”

Harry took her to the kitchen and Amelia cast a cleaning charm on him. Within a minute his blood-soaked clothing looked as good as new and the bloody footprints on the floor were gone. “Thanks,” he said. “Uncle Vernon would have bea...” He grew silent, confirming Amelia’s suspicions. She’d heard rumors of Harry’s abusive relatives, but hadn’t had the occasion to directly intervene.

“What happened, Harry?”

He replied, “I’m not sure what to say. We had just stepped through the archway behind Tom’s when we heard the explosion. I was a step

behind Susan and Hannah. Hannah must have gotten hit with a piece of broken glass. I heard Freedom the phoenix coming to get me, I grabbed Susan and Hannah and we were fireflashed here. Hannah was bleeding pretty badly. I knew that you had a cellular telephone and I asked Susan to call you. She had to use a charm to unlock the door but you got here pretty quickly; so I hope that Hannah will be OK."

Amelia nodded for a moment and asked, "Why was your door locked?" Harry gave an embarrassed look and she helped him saying, "It was obvious that the door was locked from the outside. Is that the usual case?"

Harry replied, "My Uncle really doesn't want anything to do with me, so they always keep the door locked."

Barely containing her anger, Bones asked, "Do they know that you can leave the room?"

Harry replied, "No."

She asked, "So as far as your Uncle knows, you haven't used the loo or had any food or water for almost a week?"

Harry replied, "I s'pose."

"So how do you get out? It's fairly obvious what you've been eating. Harry you are aware that there are laws designed to protect, ch... young witches and wizards, right?"

Harry replied, "If there are, they don't seem to have done much good in my case." He pointed behind him and said, "This is where I spent the first ten years here."

Not exactly understanding him, she asked, "Where?"

Harry opened the latch on the stairway cupboard, pulled the string for the dim lightbulb, and said, "Here."

She stared in the cupboard for a moment and her heart sank when she saw the crib mattress on the floor. Somehow, she knew that he

wasn't joking. If anything, she felt that he was understating the situation. She turned off the light and closed the door. She said, "Please wait here for a minute. I'm going to check on Hannah. I'll be right back." She couldn't remember the last time that she wanted to hurt another person so badly.

She returned a minute later with the mediwitch and said, "Harry, I'm going to get Becky Abbott. I'll be right back." She opened the back door and vanished.

Harry nodded and the Mediwitch asked, "Are you certain that you're not injured, Mr. Potter?"

Harry checked himself briefly and replied, "I'm fine."

She replied, "I wanted to tell you that the quick thinking on Susan's and your part saved your friend's life today. The glass had nicked an artery in her neck and it must have ruptured a few seconds later. Without your help, she would have bled out within a minute." Harry nodded trying to minimize her words but she said, "Your little phoenix tried to help when I was tending Hannah's other cuts, but she must be too young to have developed healing tears yet. I'm really not familiar with a phoenix's ability to flash travel a person. What does it feel like?"

Harry thought for a moment and replied, "A sudden puff of warm wind, I guess. It's over in a second."

Amelia and Becky Abbott arrived a minute later. The easygoing mum that Harry had met the day before, looked terrified. In a worried voice she asked, "Where's Hannah?"

"Upstairs the last door on the right," replied Harry.

She hurried up the stairs. A few minutes later, Susan called, "Harry, can you come up?"

He walked up the stairs and was shocked at what he saw. The wall by his bed was sprayed with blood. His blood-soaked shirt was on the floor. Hannah's shirt and shorts were on the floor. They were drenched with blood. She was sitting up on his bed by Susan,

wearing one of his school uniform shirts and an old pair of sweatpants. She smiled weakly at him and said, "Thanks, Harry."

Not being very comfortable in these situations, he just said, "Hi, Hannah."

Mrs. Abbott started cleaning up the mess but Amelia said, "I'll take care of it, Becky. Will you be all right to take Hannah home?"

She replied, "I'm not sure." She looked at Harry and asked, "Harry do you suppose...?"

Harry immediately nodded and replied, "It's up to Freedom."

The little phoenix hopped on his shoulder and Harry said, "You both need to hold on. Becky and Hannah took his hand and in a flash of flame were gone.

When they had left, Amelia, asked, "Susan, are you sure you're all right?"

She nodded and held out her arms to be hugged, eyes glistening. "Auntie, I was so scared. It happened so quickly. One second we were walking along laughing and the next we were here and then we saw that Hannah was drenched in blood. Harry took control and saved her."

Amelia hugged her Niece for a minute and suggested, "Let's get his room cleaned up." Susan stood out of the way while Amelia drew her wand. She looked at the walls for a minute and cast a cleaning charm on all of them. She did the same with Hannah's clothing and the sheets on Harry's bed. Susan picked up her things and folded them.

"It's not much of a room," Susan noticed, sadly. Harry's bed and chest of drawers looked like Salvation Army cast-offs. "Smidgen has a nicer room than Harry." A little angrier she added, "The rest of the house looks fine." They walked down the steps to recheck the kitchen.

Just then a loud voice came from the front door. "Potter, what the hell do you think you're up to?" Seeing Susan at the bottom of the stairs, he demanded, "Get out of my house, you filthy freak, and take that

worthless piece of shite Potter with you.” He took another few steps towards her and made a threatening gesture.

“*Stupefy*.” The angry man slumped to the carpet, where he decided to take a nap. Just then a woman at the door shrieked and Bones cast a quick *Silencio* and *Petrificus Totalus* spell in her direction.

Susan watched in amazement as her normally mild mannered Auntie levitated Vernon onto the sofa in their living room, did the same to Petunia; then cancelled the spells that she had previously place on them.

Wanting to conclude her business with the two as quickly as possible Amelia announced, “I will take Harry into my home as our guest for a few days. In the meantime, the two of you will settle down and carefully consider what prison would look like from the inside out after being convicted of violating a dozen child endangerment laws.”

“Please allow me to assure you, Mr. Dursley, that should you *ever* choose to manhandle a child in my presence again you will have made the decision to draw your last breath as a living being. Is there *any* ambiguity in what I have discussed?” She looked directly at each of them as they shook their heads no. The fire in her eyes was evident.

“Good. Then with that settled, we will wait for Harry to return and then be on our way. Susan, perhaps you could finish tidying up Harry’s room and pack his trunk for a few minutes until he gets back. In the meanwhile, I’ll keep his Aunt and Uncle company.”

... -- ...

When Harry arrived back after getting Hannah and her mum safely back to their home, Freedom took him back to his room. He was surprised to see Susan sitting on his packed school trunk. He asked, “What’s up?”

Susan replied, “Your Uncle came home and went off a bit. Auntie had a few words with him and he seemed to have calmed down. Anyway, we’d like you to stay with us for a while. She asked me to come up and get your things in order. I hope you don’t mind?”

'*Mind?*' thought Harry, He replied, "It sounds brilliant. I'll just be a second." He looked around the little room. The closet was empty, as were the drawers. He pulled up the loose floorboard and took out the thick wad of banknotes and the sack of galleons."

Susan shook her head, and pointed out, "There *are* banks you know."

Harry smiled and said, "I know. I just withdrew this a few days ago for the summer. Let's go."

Susan replied, "OK, but the next time we go shopping, you're going to get rid of all of those horrible things they gave you to wear."

"Fine with me."

"One other thing," she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for getting Hannah home safely."

Harry felt warm inside like he did when Freedom sang. He replied, "You're very welcome and thank *you*, Ms. Bones. We should probably go now. Hedwig, please meet us at Susan's." The beautiful owl hooted once and took off. They each took an end, and carried his trunk down the stairs. Harry saw his Aunt and Uncle sitting on the sofa facing Susan's Aunt who was sitting on a chair. He said, "We'll be going now. I'll be back home in a few days."

The Dursleys said nothing as the three of them held hands and Susan held Harry's trunk with her other hand. They looked on in shock as the little phoenix seemed to appear out of nowhere and landed on Harry's shoulder. In a flash, Freedom had spirited them away.

... -- ...

After they left, Petunia spat, "Home? This was *never* his home. We were simply roped into giving him house space. I never want to see him again." Vernon turned on the telly to watch the beeb.

She didn't notice the blue crackle that originated in the cupboard under the stairs and quickly faded as it shimmered up the stairs.

... -- ...

Back at Diagon Alley, Nick Straighthand was still trying to understand some of the details regarding the attack at Fortescue's. The proprietor and two customers had been killed, but two eyewitnesses insisted that they saw three kids walking toward the shop close enough so that they should have been badly injured by the exploding glass.

He looked over and saw Rita Skeeter interviewing one of the customers, and cringed as he considered what her story would look like. As he added their statements to his report he thought to himself, *'Welcome to office, Minister Scrimgeour.'*

... -- ...

Dumbledore returned to his office from Diagon Alley. There had been nothing to do to react to the attack. All-in-all he was relieved that the normally packed ice cream shop had been nearly empty, but was saddened at the loss of a good friend and the two little second years. It frustrated him to no end that, far too frequently, the victims in the war seemed to be innocent bystanders rather than participants.

He sat at the comfortable red chintz chair by the fireplace and picked up the box of broken instruments and began the arduous job of repairing the many sensors that he'd created over the years. As he scratched his crooked nose he resigned himself to the thought that at least he had an interesting project for the summer.

... -- ...

Amelia Bones' home was unlike anything in Harry's experience. Set on eight acres of lightly wooded land in view of the Cambrian hills, the home in the Severn Valley was, by any stretch of the term, a peaceful British manor. Like many of the estates in Mid-Wales, it had been constructed some five hundred years ago. Not strictly a wizarding residence, Bones and her intended husband purchased it together early in Voldemort's first rise to power. Unfortunately Stephan McDonald was killed in an unfortunate hunting accident several weeks before the new couple were to be married.

It was styled as a man's home, with massive dark oak and brick everywhere. With five bedrooms, it had always too much house for Amelia and later Amelia and little Susan, but the location offered such a fantastic view that, with the help of their wonderful house elf, Smidgen, it had always been a comfortable home.

The defining feature of the home was the spacious country kitchen. Full of windows, it was light and airy with a large cooking and food prep area and a very comfortable oiled-wood table with six chairs. As the home had been purchased from a muggle, it had electrical service and an old style wall telephone.

The back garden was well tended. Smidgen easily did the work of a full time caretaker to keep the exterior in good condition and the grounds in proper order. At Susan's request, Amelia had added a swimming lap pool. Depending on the circumstances it was used for exercise or a small armada of floaties for use by Susan and her lifelong friend, Hannah.

They had been home schooled by Becky Abbott until they were seven. She and Amelia had been in agreement that it would be highly beneficial for both girls to learn something of the nonmagical world and the two had entered the third grade in the primary school in Folkestone together.

By then they were well-versed in the existence of the magical world and had demonstrated that they were trustworthy little girls. They kept the secrets of their magical world from their other classmates. For three years they went to primary school like any other child, learning reading, grammar, arithmetic, science and history. As such, they were probably better prepared than their pureblood classmates when it came to entering a structured learning environment like Hogwarts.

Not knowing that background, Harry was quite surprised when the three of them landed in the kitchen at Amelia's home. In truth, he was expecting something similar to the disarray of the burrow. Instead it was something of a cross between Grimmauld place and a regular home. There were elements of the magical menagerie of Diagon Alley, but if Harry had been worldlier, he would have seen the home as being similar to an old-style country club. Next to the kitchen was a

comparatively small formal dining area, and a large family room. It was filled with bookcases, scores of photographs and at least a dozen wands hung on the wall, in glass cases with wooden frames. Each of the frames had a small brass plaque indicating who the owner of the wand had been.

“Welcome to our home, Harry,” said Amelia. “Smidgen has made up a room for you. We want you to feel at home here.”

“Grab an end Harry,” said Susan referring to Harry’s school trunk. “I’ll show you to your room.” They walked up the stairs and she showed Harry around. She said, “This is Auntie’s room and this one is Smidgen’s. The loo is here. We keep this one for Hannah, this one is mine and you can have this one here.” Harry was amazed when he walked in. Expecting the smallest bedroom, it was three times the size of his room at Privet Drive. It had a large window, a desk with a table lamp, a comfortable sitting chair, closet and a queen size bed. Susan asked, “Will this be okay?”

Harry was speechless for a few moments and replied, “It’s brilliant. Thank you.”

“I’ll let you be while you get your things organized. There are towels in the loo. If you need anything, let Auntie or I know. There’s lots to eat and Smidgen will take care of almost everything.”

... -- ...

Still amazed at his success in being elected Minister, Rufus Scrimgeour knew that he was facing a mountain of challenges. Fudge had left the general wizarding population as unprepared for a large scale terrorist war as he could possibly imagine. The Aurors who he had managed until a week ago were chartered and trained to catch shoplifters, not killers. In muggle terms, they were policemen, not special operations soldiers.

While Amelia had a documented succession plan in place, he silently questioned her choice of placing Shacklebolt into the wizarding bodyguard slot of the PM office. He personally would have placed one of the equally capable hitwizards, like Wood in the government office and tapped Shack for the head Auror position.

Meanwhile Scrimgeour knew that he quickly needed to do several things – obtain additional funding for use to grow the Auror corps, demonstrate that the Aurors were doing something to make the wizarding world a safer place and finally obtain a big name supporter.

The wizarding ministry was funded by means of an end-user sales tax on all goods and services sold at wizarding shops. As the wizarding government didn't need to fund roads and education at Hogwarts was funded through endowments and student tuition, the only things that really needed funding were the bureaucrats, the aurors, St. Mungo's and the stipends paid to the Wizengamot members. As such, the shop tax, as it was known, had generally been sufficient. When there were special projects that needed funding, public donations had sufficed. In Fudge's case, Lucius Malfoy or several of the other pure blood families had stepped up and funded the high-visibility projects. Scrimgeour began to realize that Fudge might have simply succumbed to the sale of excessive influence from those contributors who invariably wanted something in return.

He would need many hundreds of thousands of additional galleons to fund a prolonged fight against the terrorists who called themselves Death Eaters, and the Ministry coffers were nearly empty due to poor budgeting from Fudge and a downturn in business.

Scrimgeour realized that in many witches and wizards eyes, he had more or less come out of nowhere, like a character introduced in one of the last chapters of a novel. As such, aside from a few of the MLE department heads and the Aurors, he had no known track record. Certainly he had no personal influence among everyday witches and wizards. The eleven Death Eaters captured or killed in the last week hadn't been stopped by the Ministry Aurors; they been apprehended by a bunch of school kids and an old man. Not in office a week, he had faced the reporters at the *Daily Prophet* photographed with the smoking remains of Fortescue's and the mediwitches in the background.

He needed a high visibility supporter to jump-start the many changes and obtain the funding to make them happen. He needed Harry Potter.

... -- ...

Back in Blackpool, the man formerly known as Tom Riddle plotted his next moves. He wasn't going to win a war by blowing up ice cream shops. He'd just suffered a major defeat losing the best third of his followers. He needed to buy himself some time.

He realized that the loss of a puppet figurehead like Fudge could cause him major problems. A properly trained, well-funded, Auror corps could seriously impede his plans. He needed to quickly do two things – convince the dementors to join his side and disable the MLE department. To do that, he needed to assassinate Amelia Bones.

... -- ...

"Mr. Crow," admonished McGonagall, "did you really find it necessary to kill off three people before page fifty? Why at an ice cream store of all places? It was one of my favorite shops."

'She did it first,' thought the old scribe defensively.

McGonagall wasn't finished. "At least you had the decency to save the Abbott girl, but you have set those muggles up for a horrible fate." The gray haired scribe had a twinkle in his eye that Dumbledore would have been jealous of. "And that last line..." But it was too late. The old scribe had ridden off on his steel horse, hoping that he would meet his fellow scribe Mike in search a pint at the still water pub.

... -- ...

Chapter Six – Six Deaths

As Amelia left the house for the day, Susan asked Harry, “What would you like to do today?”

Harry thought of what he’d do at the only other wizarding home that he’d seen and replied, “Maybe you could show me around outside.”

“Sure.” She walked to the door and said, “Oh, Auntie forgot her lunch.”

“Let’s bring it to her.” As he picked up the plate with her lunch, he thought of Freedom and the little phoenix flashed onto his shoulder. Susan grabbed his other hand and they appeared in the atrium of the Ministry building a moment later. His scar had been twinging all morning and he didn’t like the look of the two wizards who had just stepped into the lift a moment before the door closed.

“Hold on,” cried Harry. He thought of the lobby outside the elevator on the second level and Freedom flashed them there just as the elevator doors were opening.

Amelia got out of the lift, surprised to see her Niece there just as Harry heard the words *Avada Kedavra*. Instinctively, Harry threw the stoneware plate towards the jet of light as he’d seen Dumbledore do against Voldemort. Unfortunately, the stoneware plate and ham sandwich offered nowhere near the level of protection that the bronze statue had. A foot in front of her when it was hit by the two jets of negative energy, the plate shattered as if whacked by a bat.

As the door was closing, Harry heard the dreaded words, *Avada K...* and whipped his wand out of his trousers and shouted “*Reducto*,” as he pointed it at one of the wizards. He had no way of knowing that his spell had hit both of the attackers, as the door to the lift had just closed.

“Oh no,” cried Susan as she saw her last worldly relative slumped on the floor splattered in blood.

“Shite,” cried Harry. He reached down to grab the woman as he had in the graveyard with Cedric. An instant later, they both disappeared.

... -- ...

The door to the lift opened on the first floor to reveal two eviscerated wizards crumpled up on the floor. Eric the guard saw them and sounded the alarm that activated a lock-down mode within the building. Seconds later the Aurors came running from their cubicles and the break room.

Nymphadora Tonks ran down the hallway and was surprised to see Susan Bones standing in the lobby by the DMLE receptionist's desk. She was more surprised to see blood splattered all over the terrazzo floor. She demanded, "Susan, what happened?"

The frantic teen wailed, "Two men killed Auntie."

... -- ...

On the first floor it was pandemonium. Bones had arrived earlier than many of the workers. At the time when Eric sounded the alarm, Arthur Weasley was walking from the employee apparation point to the lifts and was surprised to see Narcissa Malfoy walk out of the hallway coming from Minister Scrimgeour's conference room. She recognized the balding redhead whom she always had viewed as an inferior and kept walking. As the Senior Weasley was reaching into his coat pocket to pull his wand, Narcissa glanced into the open elevator, recognized the occupants, pulled on the bracelet that she was wearing on her right wrist and disappeared.

Seconds later, a dozen employees began assuming defensive positions within the Atrium. Scrimgeour's guards located and secured their principle and were moving outward to form a wider safety perimeter.

A second later, Tonks placed a frantic fire call to Dumbledore's office, calling out, "Professor, the Ministry's under attack." Before Dumbledore could respond, she had left to get to her station.

Having one of the very few secured floo connections directly into the Ministry, Dumbledore pulled his wand out and entered his fireplace to get to his office within the Wizengamot section of the Ministry building.

... -- ...

On Wisteria Way, Arabella Figg had opened her door to get the milk bottle for her cats. She dropped the bottle as she saw the dark mark floating in the air next to a massive column of black smoke. Thoughts of Mr. Tibbles forgotten, she moved with amazing speed for a seventy year old woman. Throwing an entire handful of floo powder into the fireplace, she was nearly knocked back by the whoosh that it made as the green flames roared. Sticking her head into the fire, she called, "Number twelve Grimmauld Place," and shouted, "Emergency on Privet Drive!"

... -- ...

Struggling under the dead weight of his load, the harried teen shouted at the top of his lungs, "Madam Pomfrey!"

The Master Healer dropped her book on her desk and dashed out of her office to see what the commotion was. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw her favorite teen struggling under the weight of one of her best friends. She asked, "Mr. Potter, what happened?"

Nearly buckling under the weight, Harry replied, "Two killing curses." She blanched at his words.

Unable to hold her up any longer, Harry set her down with a thump on the bed.

Pomfrey was surprised to see the blood splattered all over the woman given Harry's description, but was even more amazed to hear her old friend groan. As she took her wand out and ran it over Bones' body, images of bits of plate appeared in a haze of blue smoke above her chest and face. There was blood everywhere, but Amelia Bones was still alive.

"Potter get me two bottles of blood restorative and a bottle of alcohol from my dispensary shelf. They're the tall red..."

"I know them," replied Harry as he dashed into her office. It truth, he had much more experience with them than he wished to have.

Instinctively, Harry grabbed four bottles and the clear bottle of antiseptic.

Harry's heart dropped when he got back. The stoneware plate must have shattered into hundreds of tiny chips under the impact of the two killing curses and had hit Amelia like the force of a shotgun blast. "Sit her up and pour as much of that down her throat as you can, Potter. I'll try to repair as much of this damage as I can."

She began at Amelia's neck with the same flick and incantation over and over. As if she was holding a magnet over a pile of nails, the splinters slowly worked their way out of Amelia's tissue and collected onto the tip of Pomfrey's wand.

... -- ...

Diggle, Remus and Molly Weasley were at Grimmauld Place when they heard Figg's frantic call. "Emergency on Privet Drive."

Remus and Diggle grabbed their wands and ran out the back door. Molly began the frantic task of trying to contact other Order members. She tried the headmaster's office but received no response. She tried the Twin's shop and reached Lee Jordan, then tried to reach Moody at his home.

... -- ...

Nothing made sense at the Ministry. Conflicting stories arose – Director Bones had been murdered by two killing curses offset by the sight of two Hogwarts students who were mortally wounded in the lobby. The prominent wife of an accused Death Eater was seen leaving the Minister of Magic's private conference room at the exact moment that the apparent attack had taken place. Bones' body had not yet been discovered, yet there was ample physical evidence of an attack and a nearly hysterical teen to contend with.

Dumbledore made his way to Amelia's office where he found Susan and in what would seem to be the only calm voice in the building asked, "Susan, please look at me." His probing mind entered her own and found the memory that he was looking for. He closed his eyes,

breaking the connection and asked, "Do you have any idea where they are?"

"St. Mungo's, I suppose," replied Susan.

Dumbledore frowned and said, "I think not. Please come with me."

As they were speed-walking to Dumbledore's Wizengamot office, Arthur ran up to them and said, "Arabella reported that the Dark Mark was spotted a minute ago over Privet Drive."

Dumbledore had a terrible decision to make. Hoping that Harry would have found his way to the castle rather than walk into an attack at Privet Drive, he told Susan to take the floo to his office and find Madam Pomfrey while he would go and search Privet Drive. He gave her the floo connection and password then pulled a miniature golden snitch out of his pocket. He tapped it with his wand and disappeared.

... -- ...

Molly was frantic. She had never been so tempted to disobey an order from an Order member before. *'Where was he? Why wouldn't anyone say anything? Where was Arthur?'*

With an ever-increasing slowness, the seconds on the clock by the fireplace ticked by without yielding any answers, compounding her already dangerously-high stress level.

... -- ...

Remus and Diggle found Figg staring at the fire. The house fire was fully raging and the house was beginning to collapse in on itself. Flaming pieces of material had floated into the air and had set number two on fire as well.

Remus saw Dumbledore appear and made his way over to him. He announced, "Harry's not here. I'm all but sure of it. I think he's with..."

"Ms. Bones," they both declared at the same moment. The only difference was in their meaning. Lupin was referring to Susan while Dumbledore was referring to Amelia.

As the police and fire trucks had arrived and the officers were moving everyone back, Dumbledore said, "Our work is done here. Please go back to headquarters and await my instructions." That said, he disappeared, pondering to himself how the blood wards could have been breached.

... -- ...

Susan ran down the corridor as fast as she could, all but knocking McGonagall over. "What is wrong, Miss Bones?"

She picked herself up, cried, "Harry and Auntie... I need to get to Madam Pomfrey." That said, she took off in a dead run.

Picking up her walking stick, McGonagall followed after her.

... -- ...

Back at the Ministry, Hammer and Anna Daily had arrived in the Atrium. Looking at the two dead students, Daily shook her head and said, "Not again." They began their methodical task.

Daily took several photos of the students in the blood-splattered lift, and several of their wands before directing one of the assistants to move them and bag the wands. They were both wearing their Hogwarts uniform robes with the Slytherin patches visible, apparently to have caused less suspicion as they waited for their victim. The attendant had just finished moving them, allowing Daily to properly photograph them when a flash went off behind her. Before anyone could stop him, Bozo, the *Daily Prophet* reporter, had made his way out the visitor exit. No one noticed the little beetle crawling nearby as Daily said, "Director Bones gets hit with two killing curses, no body is found, and these two show up dead. What's next?"

"Look," said the other Auror as he held up Greg Goyle's left arm. On the backside was a newly branded Dark Mark. He held up the arm so Daily could photograph it and then held up Vincent Crabbe's arm with the same result. She said, "These two are dead. What the hell happened?" The beetle crawled away as quickly as it could.

Once outside the visitor entrance, Bozo said, "We need to get to Surrey. There was an attack at Harry Potter's."

They apparated as close to the property as they could. Bozo took a few photos with his wizarding camera while Skeeter watched in horror as the charred remains of four bodies were pulled from the home. She stood next to two women talking. One of the neighbors said, "The three Dursleys lived there. During the summer they had their nephew stay with them. His name was Potter. Must be them. No one else lived there."

Bozo took another photo and they left.

... -- ...

Susan burst through the door into the hospital wing. Harry and Poppy were each working in silence. Harry had gone through four units of blood replenishing potion and was working on the fifth. The bed was soaked with blood and had been leaking through the mattress and onto the marble floor. In a dish Pomfrey had set over a hundred of the little plate chips that she'd extracted.

In the smallest of voices Susan asked, "How can I help?"

Harry looked up and said, "Susan, please get another bottle of blood restorative from the dispensary shelf. This one's about gone."

She followed his instructions without question, silently praying that her Auntie wouldn't be taken from her too. When she came back, Pomfrey gave her a nod as she extracted another splinter from Amelia's left arm.

"My goodness, what happened?" asked McGonagall who had finally caught up with the teen.

Susan replied, "Two men fired killing curses at Auntie. Harry saved her."

"Good lord!" exclaimed McGonagall.

Suddenly there was a flash and Freedom and Fawkes appeared. Fawkes leaned over Amelia and shed dozens of pearly white tears over the most serious of the wounds. The little phoenix tried to do the same but was still too young.

“Two of them,” exclaimed McGonagall. “This *is* remarkable.”

Pomfrey continued working methodically. In truth she was grateful for the help that Dumbledore’s phoenix had been able to provide. She had removed the stoneware chips that had caused the most damage, but Bones was still bleeding profusely and had lost at least half of her own blood. Like the blood plasma used in the nonmagical world, blood restorative potion was very useful, but was not a complete substitute for a witch or wizard’s own blood. The biggest difference between the two was that the restorative potion could be administered orally. As such her red cell count was dropping dangerously low.

She sealed up the areas where she had removed the chips and splinters hoping that the most serious of the wounds had been repaired. It was tiring work. Fortunately, most of the chips had not penetrated too deeply and aside from some lung punctures, none of her organs had been damaged. However she was concerned that each of the broken pieces was sharp which increased vascular and tissue damage and were prone to chip off, which dramatically increased the likelihood of infection.

Stopping for a moment, she put her wand down and examined the bowl full of chips. There were over two hundred blood-coated chips there. Pomfrey estimated that there were at least another fifty remaining in her body as well as bits of a ham and cheese sandwich. What concerned her most were the few remaining chips lodged in close proximity to the arteries in her neck and several that were dangerously close to her right eye. If the chip cut an artery while being removed, Poppy didn’t think that Bones would survive the further loss of blood. If she didn’t get the chips that were near her eye out quickly, the Master Healer was certain that her friend would lose the sight in that eye.

... -- ...

Hammer was frustrated to no end. The only witness to the crime scene had somehow left the premises. There was no trace of Director Bones' body other than a pool of blood inside the DMLE receptionist area. She had two dead Death Eaters in the Atrium, a highly contaminated crime scene and seventy-five less-than-helpful bureaucrats running around speculating about answers to questions that weren't ready to be answered yet.

She went back to the reception area. The floor provided some clues. There were two different prints from trainers. A woman's flat healed shoe was also found at the scene. She also found a few bits of broken stoneware and blood scattered around the floor and on the top of the desk. With Daily following closely behind taking pictures, she went back to the testing area and tested the wands. Both showed several sets of killing curses as the last spells cast.

She speculated that at least one of the curses had been blocked by a dinner plate. Based on the second-hand eyewitness' description that she's heard from Tonks, the killers must have fired a second time. Whoever was with Susan must have fired a retaliatory spell or two at the assailants as they were leaving. If that was the case, the students in the lifts were most likely the assassins, not bystanders.

She quickly concluded that the most likely reason that Amelia's body had been moved was that Susan's companion believed her to not be dead. She speculated that it was Susan's companion, rather than someone accompanying Amelia, because of the type of shoeprint. In spite of Susan's statement, Hammer hoped against hope that Bones might still be alive.

They continued the task of logging in their evidence.

... -- ...

Within an hour, the *Daily Prophet* had published a special edition. Scrimgeour read it with increasing disgust.

Death Eaters Launch Simultaneous Raids

MLE Director Bones and Harry Potter both reported to have been killed!!

Not bothering to read the rest, Scrimgeour put the paper down and rubbed his eyebrows in stress.

He decided to get the latest information from Senior Investigator Hammer and call a press conference.

... -- ...

Thirty miles away, at Grimmauld Place, Molly Weasley read the same headline and collapsed on the floor clutching her chest.

Unfortunately, no one else was there to help her.

... -- ...

Dumbledore arrived back at the castle and quickly made his way to the hospital wing. He opened the door and looked in the door without saying anything. Poppy and Harry were working on Amelia as Susan and Minerva sat and watched from a distance. He studied Poppy's face for a minute and he decided by the determined, rather than frantic look on her face, that things were in hand, and he silently closed the door behind him.

He would do no good interrupting her, and introducing a team of mediwitches would most likely be a distraction rather than a help. With that in mind, he walked back to his office and took the floo back to the Wizengamot offices.

... -- ...

Hammer was complete and accurate in detailing the facts as she knew them to Scrimgeour. He was heartened by her news and asked, "So you believe that Director Bones is still alive?"

"Yes," replied Hammer. "At least I believe that she was still alive when she was moved."

"Indeed," said Dumbledore walking in the room and conjuring a copy of his favorite chintz chair. A moment later he added, "And she was still alive five minutes ago. She has many injuries, but she is in good hands."

“What happened?” demanded Scrimgeour.

“That is not my tale to tell,” replied Dumbledore, “but I believe that she was rescued by Harry Potter.”

“How?” inquired Scrimgeour. “I heard that there were a dozen witnesses who saw his burned-up body being pulled from his Aunt’s house.”

“There were four people in the home when the Death Eaters sealed and torched it, killing those inside. Two of there were doubtless Vernon and Petunia Dursley. It is likely that the other two were Harry’s cousin Dudley and one of his friends. The local authorities will clarify those uncertainties in time. Suffice it to say, that Harry is not seriously injured.”

“Who killed the two Death Eaters?” asked Hammer.

“I do not have an answer to that question, though I suspect that Harry may be able to help answer those questions at a later date. He is, however, quite occupied at the moment.”

... -- ...

Back at the hospital wing, Freedom flew over by Harry as Pomfrey continued her grueling work. They were all heartened as the little phoenix began to sing. As Pomfrey removed a half-inch sliver of the dinner plate from an area just beneath Amelia’s right eye, Freedom flew over and dropped a single tear onto the wound. Harry stroked the beautiful bird in thanks as he watched the wound heal itself.

Poppy put her wand down and sat down in a chair completely exhausted. It had been years since she had cast the extraction and healing spell a hundred times in a day. She had never cast it over two hundred fifty times in a single day before this. She was, in her own words, magically exhausted.

Susan handed Harry part of an orange and said, “Here, have some of this.”

Harry replied "Thanks," and held a slice out for Freedom. He said, "Thanks girl," as he stroked her yellow and red feathers. He was rewarded by her soft singing.

It was late-afternoon.

... -- ...

Hannah and her Mum were frantic as they looked at the special edition of the *Daily Prophet*. Hannah sobbed, "Susan finally meets a great guy and those bastards take her Auntie and Harry away in the same morning. Mum, What are we going to do?"

But there was no answer to a question like that. For several hours they sat at their table in silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

About the time that Becky had decided it was time to get up and make dinner, the little yellow and red phoenix flashed into their kitchen and sang a note.

Hannah looked up as the phoenix hopped onto her shoulder and sang another note. Somehow she knew that Freedom needed to take her and her Mum someplace. She said, "Grab on, Mum."

"Where are we going?" asked Becky.

"We'll find out in a minute," replied Hannah. Suddenly she felt a spark of hope where there had been none. A moment later they were standing outside the hospital wing of Hogwarts. The little phoenix urged them to open the door.

Hannah opened the door and saw her best friend sitting between two people that she believed to be dead. A look of joy at seeing them alive sprang to her face. She ran to Susan and hugged her best friend like she would never let go.

With slightly more restraint, Becky gave Harry a hug and asked, "Are you really okay?"

A bit surprised, Harry replied, "Right as rain. Why wouldn't I be?"

Becky wasn't sure what to say. Nothing in her life had prepared her for the awkwardness of the situation. She replied, "There was a fire at your home. The paper said that you were..."

"Indeed, Mr. Potter is very much alive," stated Dumbledore who had just returned from Scrimgeour to check on Amelia. He added, "And Amelia's injuries, grievous as they are, should also heal in time."

Becky asked, "What happened?"

Dumbledore replied, "There is much to discuss and others who also deserve to hear the answers, but first, let us go and have some dinner. It has been a long afternoon. Come along, Poppy. Amelia's house elf Smidgen will alert us if Amelia's condition changes."

Poppy began to protest, saying that she needed to stay by the floo in case of emergency, but Dumbledore replied, "Come along Poppy. It isn't everyday that we hear of the loss of two great people and find them again."

Reluctantly, the Master Healer got to her unsteady feet. Harry took her arm in his, Susan Hannah and Becky followed suit and the five of them walked arm-in-arm to the great Hall for dinner with Dumbledore and McGonagall following behind, smiling.

... -- ...

"Masterfully told," Mr. Crow, remarked McGonagall, "but surely there is more to the tale?"

The Storyteller nodded, rubbing his sore fingers.

"Perhaps you have found another tale worth hearing while you soak your hand in Essence of Murtlap?" inquired McGonagall.

Crow nodded and handed her a slip of parchment. It read, *Taking Control – Fake a Smile*.

As the old wordsmith bathed his wrist in the soothing liquid, he wondered if his steel horse would enjoy firewhiskey.

... ..

Chapter Seven - Hogwarts

Old-Crow, Scribe

Having been pulled aside and briefed for a moment before dinner by Dumbledore, Becky Abbott had kept the conversation light. She told them stories of her days at school in the early seventies.

Harry sat there politely, but he wasn't really listening. He kept thinking about the day's events; in awe of Madam Pomfrey's skill as a healer. By any stretch of the definition, she had been amazing. He thought of many adjectives for her as he had watched her work, but *cool under fire* kept coming back to him. He had never seen anyone injured as badly as she had been, let alone have them survive.

After desert had been served and eaten, Dumbledore announced that several of the Ministry investigative Aurors had scheduled some time to come over and talk with Susan and Harry about the events of the day.

Sensing what was coming, Becky Abbot asked, "Professor, might this wait until Amelia is well enough to participate?"

Dumbledore replied, "Yes it could, but as far as most of WIZARDING Britain believes, Harry and Amelia were both killed today."

"That's a terrible lie," admonished Poppy, who rarely spoke at the dinner table. Then again, she usually was forced to sit next to Snape. The Abbotts, Susan, and Harry were, in her opinion, far more interesting.

"For once, Rita Skeeter appears to have printed what she believed to be the truth," replied Dumbledore. "It appears that she overheard one or more of the investigative Aurors and she was on the scene at Privet Drive and observed the officials discussing the case."

"What happened there?" asked Harry.

"From what we know or can surmise, the house caught on fire and those inside were unable to escape. The muggles are treating it as suspected arson due to the nature of the fire."

“What do you mean, Professor?” asked Susan.

“The information that we were able to obtain from witnesses is that the entire outside of the home was suddenly engulfed in flames and the Dark Mark was cast above the fire. One of the neighbors claims to have heard pounding on the door and screams for help. That was not the case by the time that we had arrived. That said, it is most likely that someone managed to breach the protective wards, seal the home and start a fire from the outside. Based on the speed with which the house was engulfed in flames, it is likely that there were three or four Death Eaters at work. They were probably not on the property longer than a minute.”

Hannah sat there in horror as Professor Dumbledore described in detail how Harry’s Aunt, Uncle, Cousin and a family friend were trapped inside, dying horrible deaths using the very spells that she had learned last year in charms. She had no idea how badly Harry had been mistreated there over the years and assumed that he would be devastated over losing his relatives.

Susan held Harry’s arm as Dumbledore spoke. A moment later, Freedom flashed above them and glided down to Harry’s shoulder. She began singing softly, washing away some of the hurt that Harry was feeling. In truth, Harry was feeling hurt, mostly at the loss of his Cousin who had changed greatly after the dementor attack the summer before. He felt truly alone in the world.

“You’re not alone, Harry,” whispered Susan but she wasn’t able to finish her thought as Smidgen suddenly appeared. “Miss Susan, comes quick. Miss Amelia...”

Before the house elf could finish her thought, Harry had grabbed Pomfrey’s hand and Susan grabbed Harry and the three of them disappeared in a flash of flame.

An instant later they were in the hospital wing. Amelia was shivering in her bed but was awake. Poppy cast a warming charm on her friend, smiled and said, “If you wanted to spend an evening visiting Amelia, you could have owled.” She smiled again at her friend and asked, “Are you in any pain?”

Bones answered, "Not much, but I feel quite weak. How did I get here?"

Harry replied, "I brought you here, Ma'am."

She gave Harry a thoughtful look and asked, "And do I want to know why you brought me here?"

"It was the only thing I could think of."

Having arrived just a minute after Harry, Dumbledore said, "Poppy and Amelia, with your permission, I will floo to the Wizengamot office and bring back one of the solicitor pensieves and a few interested people. I won't be but a minute; then perhaps Harry and Susan can share their remarkable story with us."

Hannah whispered to Susan, "What's going on?" but Becky gave her a *'mum look'* to be patient.

Meanwhile, Susan gave Amelia a huge hug and said, "I love you so much, Auntie. I was so scared."

When she was done, Poppy said, "If you will all give me three minutes, I want to have a quick look at our patient before they return." Everyone congregated right outside the door to wait. Poppy waived her wand over Amelia's neck several times and made a few notes then repeated the procedure around her chest and arms. Again, she wrote a few notes in her logbook. Finally she carefully checked around Amelia's eyes noting that her eyes were following the movement of her wand tip and appeared focused.

Amelia asked, "Do I want to know?"

Poppy replied, "We have a little work to do tomorrow and I will suggest that you stay at home for a week, but I do expect to receive a Christmas card from you again this year."

Bones said, "Thank you, Poppy."

The Master Healer replied, "For my small part in this, you're very welcome. However a life-debt is owed to Mr. Potter, not me. We

would not be talking together if he had taken another minute getting you here.”

She answered, “He does seem to be collecting them this year.”

Poppy nodded and said, “If you’re up to it, I’ll get the others.”

Dumbledore, Hammer, Daily, and Minister Scrimgeour arrived a moment later. Daily was holding the penseive. Dumbledore flicked his wand once moving one of the other beds to the other side of the room, conjuring ten chairs and a pedestal for the pensieve. That he was able to do all of those things simultaneously and seemingly effortlessly was amazing to everyone there.

Assuming his Wizengamot role for a moment, he said, “This will serve as the official inquiry into the events at the Ministry of Magic on the date of July 14. Miss Daily, would you be willing to act as scribe?”

She nodded and replied, “Of course, Professor.”

“Rufus and Amelia, do you find these arrangements acceptable?”
Dumbledore did not want this to escalate any further and did not want to give Scrimgeour another opportunity to parade Harry around like a show dog.

Seeing that Dumbledore might be doing something that had Harry’s best interest at heart, she mustered her strength and in a surprisingly firm voice, replied, “I find this acceptable as I’m certain Minister Scrimgeour does, as well.”

Trading an opportunity to find out what really happened earlier than he would have, against the public relations potential, he nodded and replied, “Of course. Let us begin. Amelia, if I may?”

Dumbledore was going to argue the point, but decided to wait.

Scrimgeour began, “Amelia, can you tell us what happened?”

She answered, “At about 7:30 a.m. I arrived at the apparition point, walked to the elevator along with some students. I walked out of the

elevator on my floor. I was surprised to see Susan and that was the last thing that I remember until I woke up here a few minutes ago.”

Scrimgeour asked, “Susan, can you show us your memory of the event?”

She nodded and Dumbledore said, “Susan, please concentrate at the point when you knew that you needed to get to the ministry until the time that I found you.” She nodded and he held his wand up to her temple. A moment later, he extracted a shimmering strand of light. He carefully looped the memory into the dish and said, “Please don’t say anything until it is finished. I doubt that it will last more than a few minutes. We can view it a second time if there are questions.”

Hannah watched in rapt attention as the image of Susan said, “Auntie forgot her lunch.” A moment later she and Harry were in the Ministry lobby. She caught the speed that Harry picked up the situation as he pointed to Susan’s Aunt Amelia standing at the lift to go down to her office. She saw the immediate concern on Harry’s face when he saw the two men get into the elevator immediately after her. She tensed as she saw the tip of a wand pointing out of the sleeve of one of the men.

A moment later the scene changed and Susan and Harry were in the receptionist area and the lift door opened. Through Susan’s eyes, Hanna saw her Auntie take a step forward and heard the words that she’d only learned of in class, *Avada Kedavra*. In the same instant she saw two jets of green light fly towards Auntie and a dinner plate thrown. Whether by miracle, or profound skill, the plate intercepted the beams of light and shattered into hundreds of pieces. She saw Harry come into her view taking a step towards Auntie and heard another killing curse being formed. Quicker than she imagined possible, Harry had drawn his wand and fired a *Reducto* hex in the direction of the lift door which was closing. She had a hard time reconciling the two images that she had of Harry – teenager fumbling over himself at the sight of her and Susan in skimpy swimsuits and the actions of hero that she was just witnessing.

Through Susan’s eyes Hannah saw her Aunt Amelia crumpled on the floor, bleeding from hundreds of places, blood beginning to pool on

the floor. With the same quickness that he'd shown on the quidditch pitch, Harry stooped to pick her up and a moment later vanished, leaving a nearly hysterical Susan staring at a large bloody smear on the floor. Rather than watch Susan crumble from fear, Dumbledore stood, tapped the pensieve on one of the runes and the three-dimensional holograph sank back into the bowl.

There was silence for nearly a minute until Harry asked, "What happened to the two attackers?"

Hammer replied, "They were marked Death Eaters, Harry. Your spell must have hit both of them. They died a short time after we found them."

Harry slumped down and in a defeated voice said, "I didn't mean it."

Scrimgeour said, "Of course you did, Son. You saw an eminent attack of deadly force and did what you had to do to stop it. You improvised in a moment of need and reacted faster than anyone that I've seen to save Amelia's life. You're alive, Amelia's alive, Susan's alive and two more killers are off the streets. I wouldn't have expected as much from any of the Aurors that I commanded and I'm certain that I couldn't have done as well myself. You're not in any trouble Harry, and to be honest, I don't know how to adequately thank you. You ended two lives today Harry, there is no denying that, but you did what you had to do to save good people's lives."

Amelia said in a much gentler voice, "Harry, I have a friend on the Auror services team that I would like you to talk with in a few days. She'll help you sort out your feelings about this." She glanced at Hammer, who nodded imperceptibly. Then she asked, "Harry, I'm not sure that I want to know, but how did you think to toss the plate in front of those curses and how did you know that it might work?"

Sheepishly Harry replied, "Professor Dumbledore did the same for me in the Atrium that night, and honestly, I didn't know if it would work. It was all that I had available. I'm sorry that it blew up and cut you so badly, Ma'am."

She held her arms out to him and Harry came to her, with tears welled in his eyes. He might be the savior of the wizarding world, but

at that moment he was a stressed-out fifteen-year-old teen who'd had a terrible day.

The others looked away to give them a moment to collect themselves. Amelia whispered something in Harry's ear. He nodded and she patted him on the head and released her hold on him.

As Harry sat down, Hammer said, "I know that it's just a formality Mr. Potter, but I need to examine your wand again." Hannah gave another snigger until her mum gave her a withering look. True to his word Harry had just cast the one spell since the last time that she had checked and cleared it. Daily recorded her findings in her logbook and Hammer handed the holly wand back to the teen. She said, "Thank you, Mr. Potter. Everything is in order."

It looked like the meeting was over, but Amelia surprised everyone by saying, "Thank you Connie, thank you Anna. Please return the equipment and file your reports. It has come to my attention that Harry has filed a Head of Household application. Professor Dumbledore, if you would be willing to act in your Wizengamot role, we should be able to hear this and be done in the next few minutes. I will be acting as Harry's advocate in this matter. Minister, if you would proceed."

Scrimgeour was taken surprise at this, but given the events of the day, it made sense. He began, "Harry, do you have the financial means to support yourself for the next few years?"

He replied, "I have quite a bit of gold left in the vault that my parents left me sir, nearly fourteen thousand Galleons. Actually, I have a bit more than that," he said as he reached into his pocket.

Scrimgeour chuckled, and replied, "An exact count to the nearest knut isn't required Mr. Potter. Where will you be living for the remainder of the summer?"

Harry replied, "Susan and her Aunt invited me to stay at their home for the summer, Sir. I've been there for a few days now. I could find someplace else next summer."

Amelia shook her head and replied, "Harry, you may stay with us as long as you wish."

Dumbledore added, "Harry also has some additional assets that he may not yet be aware of. In the coming years he will gain full access to the Potter trust. The specifics are not material to Harry's application, but it is unlikely that he will ever want for money."

Harry looked embarrassed at his words and was glad when Dumbledore said, "Harry has met the financial means test; he has a good home to live in. Rufus, please continue."

"Harry, have you ever been convicted of a serious crime?"

Amelia spoke up, saying, "Harry was falsely accused of using a hovering charm in his home when he was twelve. It turned out that Dobby the house elf was levitating a cake in the kitchen..."

Harry interrupted and said, "Pudding. It was a pudding. My Uncle was pretty put out about it when it smashed on the floor."

Everyone except Amelia laughed at his words. She gave an involuntary shudder thinking what *'pretty put out'* would have resulted in.

Poppy was watching her patient and said, "If possible, perhaps we could hurry this along."

Harry was trying to frame his response about the unforgivable cast in the Atrium but Bones replied, "Acting in my official capacity, I did levy a small fine against Mr. Potter for mishandling his wand a few weeks ago. As such, that is not a part of his record, and Mr. Potter is under no obligation to ever bring it up again regardless of the circumstances."

Dumbledore understood the implications of expunging the failed Cruciatus curse from Harry's record, knowing that he would soon be called as the star witness in the trial against the captured Death Eaters. He waited in silence until Scrimgeour asked, "Can you give us the specifics, Son?"

Harry replied, "Not really sir, I was fighting against Bellatrix Lestrange after she had murdered my godfather. I tried to stop her, but in the heat of the moment, I couldn't cast my spell properly."

Harry was pleased with his answer. It was truthful, but had not revealed anything.

Scrimgeour had heard a confidential debriefing on the matter and was also satisfied with the teen's response. He said, "Son, must of our Aurors on the force would wet themselves at the thought of facing Bellatrix Lestrange, let alone chasing after her. I think what you meant to say was that in the fog of battle, you did everything that you could to stop an escaped, convicted murderer and keep yourself alive. No additional detail is required, now or in the future. Between us, I wish that you'd have had the chance to pop her with a solid *Reducto* or bone shattering curse, but you did what you had to do. I have no further questions and recommend immediate approval of Mr. Potter's application. Amelia?"

She replied, "I also endorse Harry's application and have every confidence that he will continue to exercise good judgement within our world. Professor?"

Dumbledore was silent for a moment as he framed his response. He knew that Harry was as safe at the Bones residence as anyplace except Grimmauld place and Hogwarts. He had no authority to force Harry to live in a home that he didn't own and didn't want to stay at. He asked, "Harry, have you considered staying with Remus Lupin?"

Not wanting to go there, Harry replied, "Remus and I talked about it yesterday, Professor. He decided to put his new home up for sale and find someplace else to live. I told him where I was staying and he seemed to think that it was a good idea that I stay there if I was welcome. Otherwise, I suppose I could go and lease a flat somewhere."

Dumbledore really didn't have the authority to force Harry to live with anyone either and didn't want to damage their relationship now that it seemed to be on the mend. He said, "I concur with Amelia and Minister Scrimgeour that it is in the wizarding world's best interest that you be considered an adult. As such, you will be solely

responsible for all of your own debts and actions from this day forth. You will be allowed to enter into contracts, though seeking qualified advice is always a good idea. Should you find a willing partner, you will be allowed to marry, and you are granted adult status with respect to Gringotts. The Potter trust, as I am aware of it, is a phased-in trust, meaning that at age seventeen you would have had partial access to it with full access attained at age twenty five. The last person to have full access to it was your Grandfather. You now have the same access that you would have attained on your seventeenth birthday. I would recommend that you continue to keep in contact with your account manager there. He will be informed of your change in status within the hour.”

As he conjured the form, signed it and handed it to the others to sign, he said, “Harry, as I’ve mentioned to you before, my greatest concern for you is in regards to your safety. You have acquired a sizeable collection of enemies thus far, and will need to continue to exercise vigilance through your life. Your enemies are also the light side’s enemies, and you have many resources to draw from. However, having enemies should *not* preclude you from enjoying your life to the fullest. You will want to learn to create portkeys and to apparate as soon as you can. As you probably know, those are regulated activities and you need to fill out a form and demonstrate sufficient skill in both to be licensed when you are ready.”

Harry nodded in response.

Dumbledore continued, “Perhaps you might convince Director Bones to let you avail yourself of some of the training facilities that the Ministry has available to assist the continued development of your already formidable defensive skills. In fact, there are many witches and wizards who would be more than willing to assist you as you grow your skills. However those are different topics for another day. Lastly, Amelia, as a precaution, you may consider stationing one of the hit-wizards at your fine house for the rest of the summer.” She nodded in agreement.

Looking at Susan, Harry, Hannah and Becky he asked, “Might I offer the four of you sleeping quarters in the castle’s guest rooms for the

evening? Doubtless you will all want to help Amelia continue on the path to full recovery in the morning.”

It sounded like a good idea. They all hugged Susan’s weary Aunt and Poppy goodnight and were shown to their rooms where they had a restful night’s sleep. Harry was grateful that Freedom was there to sing off and on throughout the night.

... -- ...

The next morning, Severus Snape had the unfortunate luck to still be at Voldemort’s hideout in Blackpool when the morning edition of the *Daily Prophet* came.

Convulsing under the strongest Cruciatus curse that he had ever experienced, Snape saw the object of his Master’s anger. On the floor was a half burned copy of the morning paper. On the front page was a photo of Harry Potter standing by Bones’ hospital bed. Bones was holding up the special edition of the *Daily Prophet* that had announced their deaths. The headline read *Light Side two, Death Eaters nil*.

Several minutes later Snape crawled away from the room a broken man. Forget children, he doubted that he would ever be able to stand in a men’s room again.

... -- ...

“Mr. Crow, a lot seems to have happened in a day’s time. Your report was accurate, I’m certain, but what of this *Gold for Freedom* scheme, and whatever were you thinking of leaving poor Molly unattended like that? I expect another update on my desk within two days. *Ten feet* of parchment, Mr. Crow.”

The old scribe knew that his thoughts had turned to blue bikinis, and any news about a hidden home in London might have to wait. He needed to read the latest installment of OlafR’s story, *The Time of Change*.

... -- ...

Chapter Eight - Welshpool

Rufus Scrimgeour was both surprised and annoyed to see Narcissa walk into the receptionist office the next morning and announce that she had an appointment. He was certain that the two students who had tried to assassinate Bones had been given orders by Voldemort himself. He wondered what the man had been thinking. Was he expecting them to have been successful, or were they simply a throw-away warning message? Having seen the memory of the attack, he concluded that it was the real deal. He would have to re-evaluate the security of the entire ministry.

Dressed in midnight blue form-fitting robes, Narcissa said, "Good morning, Minister. I hope you slept well last night." There was no hint of intimidation in her voice, but Fudge would have soiled himself given a similar situation.

Undaunted, Scrimgeour replied, "Actually, I did. You brought something for me?"

"I have. Where would you like it?"

He pointed to the spot by the corner. That much gold would certainly be quite heavy even with a feather lightening charm.

She took four miniature footlocker looking boxes from her purse, set them down and gave a surprisingly long incantation to expand them.

Scrimgeour remained seated while she did her work. He would have the goblins check the gold for curses or portkeys after she left. When she finished, he pointed to one of his chairs and said, "Perhaps you would care to have a seat."

Narcissa sat down and carefully crossed her legs, facing him.

Scrimgeour kept a calm look on his face and said, "The rather crude attack on Director Bones yesterday will add another eight million galleons to the price. To throw a bit of urgency into the matter, it seems that one of the other prisoners, Leon Crabbe, attempted to escape late last evening. This is what happened." He pointed to the same solicitor pensieve that Anna Daily had used the night before.

He tapped three of the runes with his wand and a three dimensional holograph appeared. It was an image of the death chamber. Crabbe was tied up but ungagged. Someone outside the image of the memory cast *mobile corpus* and the hulking man was lifted horizontally, about four feet into the air, legs thrashing violently within the confines of his shackles. Slowly he floated up to the veil and very slowly was passed through it. The anguished screams were as bad as anything that Scrimgeour had ever heard. Hearing them a second time in twelve hours didn't make them any better.

He watched as Narcissa sat in the chair, expressionless. He assumed that she had known the man, perhaps had even been forced to endure his company for the occasional dinner. He had chosen Crabbe for that reason and to emphasize recognition of his son's attack against Bones.

He said, "It is my biggest fear that Lucius will somehow hear of Crabbe's plan and foolishly try to do the same thing. That said, there will be no more attacks in this building. We both know where the other lives. You have the gold to do this. Either agree or leave. Hopefully Voldemort won't give me another reason to raise the price beyond your means in the mean time."

After a moment, Narcissa replied, "Agreed. I will return tomorrow morning with twelve more chests. You will have Lucius free to go on Thursday at noon." The additional eight million galleons that Scrimgeour demanded would empty their vault, but she was certain that the Dark Lord would provide.

"Fine," replied Scrimgeour, "He'll be released, but if he gets picked up for so much as littering anytime soon, he'll be back in jail."

... -- ...

Wednesday was another hot day that found Harry and Susan face down, gently paddling their floatie air mattresses in Susan's pool. She asked, "Harry, what's it like?"

"Huh?" His mind had been pondering if her new swimsuit was somehow smaller than the last one.

“Being the boy-who-lived. I’ve seen hundreds of people staring at you in school. Now I understand why you don’t go hang out in Diagon Alley. You can’t buy a new pair of trousers without Teen Witch Weekly speculating about some utter nonsense. How do you cope and remain such a nice guy?”

“Dunno. Ignore it all I guess. How do you get by, with your Aunt being so important? She practically runs the wizarding fight against the Death Eaters.”

“I don’t really ask her that much about her work. I’m just Susan.”

“Same difference; I’m just Harry. I’m nothing special.”

Her ice blue eyes met his emerald green ones and she said, “You are to me. I like *you* Harry, not the-boy-who-lived, just you.”

“I really like you too, Susan. You’re a very special person in my eyes.” His sincerity was obvious.

“Thanks.”

Thinking got the better of him for a minute and he asked, “But I killed those people. How could you ever lo... how could you ever see me as anything other than a murderer?”

She slid off her floatie and pushed him off of his. When he came up for air she pulled him into the tightest hug that she could possibly give. Suddenly Harry was quite aware that she was a very healthy young woman. She pulled his face to hers and gave him a desperate kiss. For a few seconds he was stunned; then he did what he could to kiss her back. It was... very nice.

Tears began to well in her eyes as she spoke. She was standing in the pool with her arms on his shoulders standing on her toes so they were nearly the same height. She said “Harry, I can’t tell you how much I wish that the three of us had never been put in that awful position. I wish those two had been hit by a bus on their way to the Ministry, but they weren’t. I wish that Auntie had never got on the lift with them, but she did. I wish that you weren’t forced to make that awful decision, but you were. But Harry, given that they were there,

and they had tried to kill Auntie, and they would have tried to kill you and me, I can't thank you enough for saving all of us. They *had* to be stopped or they would have killed other people. You *saved* us, Harry. You saved Auntie, you saved me, you saved yourself and you saved others from getting killed. They didn't cast some jelly legs jinx at Auntie, or at me. Without you, we would both be dead."

Her Hufflepuff tenacity was just getting going. "*They* made a choice to become stupid Death Eaters. *They* made a choice to learn that horrible curse. *They* made a choice to try and kill people that day. Their deaths are *their* fault Harry, not yours. *You* made split-second choices so we could live. I didn't want to lose Auntie; I didn't and don't want to lose you either. Thank you." She wrapped her arms around him again.

Harry felt the softness of her body pressed against his and felt as content as he could remember. The little phoenix began to feel her companion's love and it gave her the same feeling that her singing gave him. Five minutes later, their worlds felt righted again.

With a mischievous grin on her face she offered, "Would you like me to put some suntan oil on you back?"

Harry nodded and replied, "Please. Of course I'd be delighted to return the favor when you're done."

... -- ...

At dinner that night, Harry asked, "How do underage tracking charms work, Ma'am?"

She considered his words for a moment and replied, "Harry, you have held my broken body in your arms and saved my life. I hope that puts us on a first name basis. Okay?"

Harry nodded "Okay..." She gave him a patient look, and he finished, "Amelia."

She smiled and asked, "Thank you. I'm happy to answer your question, but why do you ask? Knowing your reasoning can help me frame my answer better."

“Those two Death Eaters who...” Harry was obviously struggling with his words.

“Died trying to kill us, Vincent Crabbe and Greg Goyle, go on.” She saw him start to curl up into his emotional shell again and drew him out, saying, “Go on, Harry. What about them?”

Harry replied, “I’ve been given very specific warnings every time I’ve used my wand out of school. How could they have learned to use the killing curse without someone noticing? Professor Moody, Barty Crouch Junior told us it was really hard to cast. They must have practiced before they went after... before they tried to kill us.”

Collecting his thoughts for a moment, he added, “I guess my questions are - Are all wands supposed to have some sort of tracking charms on them or only underage wizards? Were they using their own wands? Can you tell if they have been taken off or put back on? Who would know about those things? Those are the sort of questions that I’m wondering about.”

She sat there quietly for a moment to see what he would do. As she suspected, he had more on his mind.

“I was talking with Hagrid once, and he told me that loads of suspected dark wizards got off the first time claiming that they were under the Imperius curse. Can a person be marked against their will? If they were a good person, and everyone was supposed to have tracking charms, how could they explain that theirs went missing?”

She smiled and said, “Take a breath, Harry. We’ll get these sorted out. Those are all good questions, but I’ll have to ask different people about some of them. If you and Susan would excuse me for an hour, I’ll fire-call some people at the ministry for some answers. We’ll talk about them over a late desert. Is that okay?”

The teens both nodded and announced, “We’ll be outside.”

... -- ...

Amelia put in a firecall to Connie Hammer and asked her to come over for a few minutes. She explained her questions and asked that

Hammer and Daily check them out themselves, being certain to maintain the chain of evidence, and to let her know the results by noon the next day.

She was about to open the back door to call the teens back, but saw them together and decided that she could wait. As she sat down in her comfortable chair and turned on the reading lamp, there was a smile on her face.

... -- ...

Arthur sat quietly by his wife's bed at St. Mungo's. Tonks had found Molly on the floor at Grimmauld place. She had been dizzy and disoriented, apparently from stress and had been admitted into the center for overnight observation.

He considered the shocking news of the last few days – the attempted assassinations of Amelia and Harry and the horrible murders of his remaining family. The rumors had been terribly difficult to manage with dozens of concerned witches and wizards coming into the ministry building and demanding to see Harry and to a lesser degree Amelia in the flesh. He could hardly blame them, given Fudge's nearly unbroken string of cover-ups.

... -- ...

When the teens arrived back inside, Amelia asked Smidgen to set out dessert. She was very tired from the day, but had some news to share. She sipped her tea for a moment as the two teens settled down and each had taken a sip of their butterbeer. When they were ready she said, "Harry, your line of questioning turned out to be quite interesting. By British law, every wand used in the country is required to have its magical signature registered, rather like having a serial number on a firearm. It is rarely enforced or checked, but it is a punishable offense to have the recorded signature altered or removed. Connie is a stickler for those details and was a great resource to talk with. So far, so good?"

Harry looked at Susan who nodded and replied, "Okay."

Bones continued, "There is an extra charm added to wands sold to underage witches or wizards that tracks individual spells and has them recorded in Malfalda Hopkirk's office. You would be familiar with her. Actually, I hope that you have the chance to meet her someday. She is interesting to talk with, but back to task. It *is* legal for a witch or wizard to inherit and use a wand from a deceased relative. Most don't use them because the wand is seldom as good of a fit as one that Ollivander would select for a young witch or wizard."

Harry caught on to her point and said, "But the wand that somebody gets from Uncle whoever wouldn't have the tracking charm on it. That's how the old family kids get so much practice during the holiday."

"Right. If a family wand is a reasonable fit for a student, they could practice with or without their parent's supervision and the underage tracking team would never be the wiser."

"But that's not fair," said Susan.

Her Aunt replied, "I agree, but most witches or wizards have to try three or four wands before they find one that fits, so in most cases they get a new one of their own."

Harry said, "My friend Neville used to use his Dad's wand. I wonder how good it fit him?" Thinking for a second to his own experience at Ollivander's Harry said, "I must have tried over a hundred wands before Ollivander gave me..." He stopped, not knowing if his wand's origin was widely known.

Bones investigative eye picked up his distraction and gently asked, "What is it, Harry?"

He replied, "Mr. Ollivander told me that my wand and Riddle's are brother wands. They each have a feather from the tail of Fawkes the phoenix."

Bones had heard about the events from the graveyard and knew about the brother wand effect. She suggested, "Maybe you should go see him tomorrow. Perhaps Freedom would offer to give you a feather and he could make you another wand."

Harry said, "That's a great idea. Then he asked, "Will you be okay by yourself? Maybe..."

Amelia replied, "Michelle Wood will be coming to stay with us for the rest of the summer. If you and Susan were serious about getting some additional training during the rest of the summer I'm certain that she would be willing to help."

... -- ...

Narcissa arrived Thursday morning and wordlessly set the twelve trunks on the floor and cast the charms to expand them to their original size. The trunks from the previous day had been moved and were gone. In truth she had all but emptied the Malfoy vault and had sold off nearly all of their investments to come up with the twelve million Galleons. She had not touched the nearly half million that she had squirreled away over the years, nor did she have any reason to believe that Lucius hadn't done the same, but as a family, their only remaining asset of substance was their home. When she had finished, she sat down and demanded, "Where is my husband?"

Scrimgeour replied, "He's having a revealing conversation with one of the investigators right now. He'll be ready to leave here tomorrow at noon. Don't forget to bring him a mac. It's supposed to be raining all day."

With a trace of the Malfoy arrogance she said, "You told me he'd be released today."

"No. *You* said he'd be released today. I said he'd be ready to leave tomorrow at noon," rebuked Scrimgeour.

... -- ...

In Blackmoor that afternoon, Voldemort finished going over the plan with Snape and Draco for the third time.

Draco said, "When I get back do I get to receive a mask?" The masks had small marks on them to indicate rank within the Dark Lord's organization; the newest recruits did not yet have masks. Draco felt

that his promotion was days overdue, even though he was still in school.

Snape cringed, waiting for the Dark Lord's usual reaction to unsolicited questions, but was surprised to hear Voldemort hiss, "You shall have your wish, young Malfoy. Carry out the plan and you shall be rewarded. Do not disappoint me."

... -- ...

The next morning was cloudy and it looked like it would rain in the afternoon. At breakfast Amelia said, "Harry, I put a firecall in to Ollivander's yesterday after we talked. Mr. Ollivander is expecting you this morning at nine. My understanding is that he can craft a new wand for you within a few hours. Perhaps you and Susan would want to visit some of the shops by Harrods while you wait."

Susan's eyes lit up at this, saying, "I know just the place to take him. We'll be back after lunch. Bye, Auntie."

As they were leaving Connie Hammer put in a firecall and said, "We won't let him out of our sight. I'll call you again this afternoon."

Amelia said, "Be careful, Connie."

... -- ...

Freedom flashed Harry and Susan to the alley behind the Leaky Cauldron and they walked up the street to Ollivander's. Susan shuddered as they walked past the burned out building that had been Fortescue's ice cream a week earlier. As they were walking, Harry said, "Mr. Fortescue was really nice to me the summer before third year. I was staying at Tom's for a week and a half before school started and I went there every afternoon for ice cream. He taught me more history of magic in those visits than I ever learned from Binns."

"He's dreadful," replied Susan, "and that fixation on Goblin rebellions. It's like Hagrid and his monsters."

Harry didn't say anything, but he did see that Susan had a point. She walked by him as they opened the door to the shop. Harry wore his

orange Cannons hat again. When he had closed the door behind them he inquired, "Mr. Ollivander?"

The old shopkeeper appeared behind a shelf where Harry was all but certain had been empty when they had walked in. He greeted them, "Good morning, Miss Bones. Eleven inches, heartstring and redwood, if I remember. She nodded and he added, "Good morning to you too, Mr. Potter. Ms. Bones told me your most extraordinary news. May I see her?"

"Good morning, Sir," replied Harry. "I'll call her and I hope that she'll come." He thought of Freedom and a moment later she appeared in a flash of flame.

"My goodness," said Ollivander with an unusually practiced eye, "She's barely more than a hatchling. Has she had a burning day yet?"

"I don't know, Sir" replied Harry. "She's only been with me for a week or so. How do you get a feather, Sir?"

Ollivander said, "A tail feather would work best if your extraordinary companion is willing. Just ask her."

Harry stroked the bird for a minute and thought about what he was hoping for. She shook her tail a bit and a beautiful yellow feather with a red tip fell into his hand.

"Remarkable," exclaimed the old wizard. "I have never seen a phoenix so young before, let alone had an opportunity to work with a feather from one. I will enjoy this. Please return at noon."

"Thank you, Sir," replied Harry.

"Bye," said, Susan and they closed the door behind them.

... -- ...

They went through the Leaky Cauldron, nodding at Nob, Tom's ancient helper as they left. A block away, Susan flagged down a cab and she had it drop them off outside Harrods. When they went in, Harry said, "This is the biggest shop that I've ever seen."

Taking his hand for a moment, Susan replied, "It's amazing. They have everything. Auntie says it's kind of expensive, but it is fun to look through."

"What do you want to look at?" asked Harry, who would have been happy doing almost anything with her.

"We'll know when we see it," replied Susan, and off they went. She bought Harry a new shirt and he bought himself a pair of trousers for himself and a silk blouse for her. She laughed and said, "I suppose I will need something in Gryffindor red to keep up with you." He smiled at the thought.

She bought Harry a yellow hat and Harry said, "Now we look better."

... -- ...

At eleven, the tall blonde in the red silk robes walked into Scrimgeour's office. She seemed surprised to see Lucius already seated in one of the guest chairs. She said, "I'm certain that everything is in order, Minister. We'll be going now."

Scrimgeour nodded and opened up one of his desk drawers. He took out the Death Eater mask marked LM and said, "I believe this is yours, Mr. Malfoy."

Lucius picked it up, giving Scrimgeour a cold look and put it in one of his inside pockets. He said, "I presume that you have my wand as well?"

Scrimgeour nodded, taking a sealed bag out of his drawer. He initialed the *opened by*, line on the bag and handed the distinctive serpent head wand back to the blonde haired man. Malfoy signed the release papers and receipt; then stood to leave.

She said, "We'll be leaving now. Good day, Minister."

"Good day to you, Ma'am." He sat down at his desk and began opening another letter, indicating that the meeting was over.

... -- ...

As Lucius was walking out of Scrimgeour's office a free man, Harry's scar began twinging again. They had just finished in the house wares department having found a replacement plate for the one which had broken in the Auror office. Harry instinctively rubbed his forehead and Susan noticed. She asked, "Are you all right?"

He replied, "My scar is acting up. Maybe we should be getting back to Ollivander's."

... -- ...

Back in the Ministry, the Atrium was nearly empty as Lucius and Narcissa walked to the Apparition point. At they reached the statue that was still out of order, Connie Hammer caught up to them, waving a form in her hand. She was apparently out of breath having run the distance from Scrimgeour's office. She said, "Mr. Malfoy, you forgot to sign your property return receipt form."

She held out the form and a quill in her hand.

With a look of disgust, Lucius signed the form and handed it back to her. He turned around, shocked to see that he was standing next to a woman with pink hair, wearing red silk robes. Her Auror badge was plainly visible hung on a chain that she'd just pulled out from under her blouse.

"Hello Mr. Malfoy. I'd like to take a look at your wand if you don't mind. We need to check it for the proper wand signature."

Malfoy knew that he'd been set up. Faster than anyone would have expected, he slashed Tonks' face with the blade end of his wand and turned to face Hammer.

"*Reducto.*" Malfoy was blown back a few feet from the blast of the hastily fired hex. His left shoulder was certainly broken but he still had his wand in his other hand.

"*Avada Kedavr...*" The tip of his wand lit green for a moment and died as Tonks stabbed Malfoy in the throat with her wand. A moment later Malfoy's wand fell to the terrazzo floor. The silver head gave a metallic thud as it hit.

Anna Daily took a second photo of the scene with her wizarding camera. She had captured the shot of Malfoy slicing Tonk's face.

Per standard procedure, Hammer stunned Malfoy just as he finished pulling Tonks' wand out of his throat. It probably wasn't a good idea for him to have done that. What had been a trickle of blood turned into a gush as his momentum yanked the wand from his throat tearing a major artery. Hammer, yelled, "Eric, get a team of mediwitches here." He nodded and a minute later, the team had arrived.

Hammer was tending to the obviously wounded Tonks and had left Malfoy on his own. Daily had rushed up and made a visible effort to save the wounded man.

Flash! Bozo's camera took a photo of Daily trying to help Malfoy as the mediwitches ran up to the wounded.

Fifteen minutes later, Lucius Malfoy's body was being zippered into a body bag, having died of massive blood loss inflicted by his own hand. The mediwitches had only brought four units of restorative potion – their standard emergency kit portion. Unfortunately, Malfoy had effectively bled out in the minute that it took them to arrive. Having reviewed the on-scene evidence, Auror testimony, and the photos, the wizarding medical examiner ruled that his death self-inflicted. As his body was being levitated over to the apparation point, the mediwitch team passed by Narcissa Malfoy who had just entered the building.

Not realizing that she'd just passed her dead husband, she walked into Scrimgeour's office and asked, "Where's my husband?"

Scrimgeour's assistant answered, "Mr. Malfoy was released nearly an hour ago and he's left the building. Here's a copy of the paperwork, Ma'am."

Suspicious, Narcissa asked, "Is that true?" She recognized his signature as she glanced at the paperwork.

Scrimgeour nodded and replied, "Here is the personal property return form, wand release form and pardon release form. He signed all three

of them; then left. I haven't seen him since. Enjoy your day, Mrs. Malfoy."

... -- ...

Meanwhile Snape and Draco were finalizing their plans to snatch Ollivander and steal all of the wands. Draco would walk into the store accompanied by Snape, get the drop on the old wandmaker, and stun him. Malfoy would then portkey the ancient wizard to Voldemort's hideout while Snape scooped up several hundred wands and torched the shop before leaving.

"Hurry up, Draco," said Snape as they were finishing their lunch in a secluded table at the old pub. They never noticed Harry and Susan walk by on their way to Ollivander's.

... -- ...

"Good Lord, Mr. Crow! Your reckless endangerment of that young auror is *inexcusable*. You didn't even report on her condition. And what were you *thinking*, disrespecting Albus' choice of instructors? And giving away confidential ministry secrets. The nerve!" McGonagall's stern expression could wither a blast-ended skrewt, she was so angry.

"*Fifty* points, Mr. Crow and a detention with Professor Sn..." A moment later she asked, "You *are* going to have Professor Snape return in the next term aren't you?"

A twisted smile crept onto the old scribe's face.

She nodded at him and said "One hundred and fifty points, Mr. Crow. You may even be in line for an award for special services to the school. Naturally, I will expect at least another ten feet of parchment on my desk in two days." She sat at her desk humming a Gaelic tune as she wrote her summer letters.

Having finished with his report to McGonagall, the old scribe was wondered if he could somehow apply a continuous slow-acting shrinking charm onto an object of clothing. Meanwhile he was happy

to have received an owl from his fellow scribe Bobmin and hear about the sunrise.

... -- ...

Chapter Nine – Ollivander's

Old-Crow Scribe

... -- ...

Harry and Susan walked back into the wand shop and Susan called out, "Mr. Ollivander?"

"I'm in back. Just step behind the counter," answered Ollivander as he poked his head out from behind the curtain to his workshop. "There are some stools here in the back. I'll just be a few more minutes. Come and have a look."

Susan and Harry sat on the shop stools that Ollivander had pointed to. Neither of them had been to the back of the master wandmaker's shop before. In fact, it was fascinating.

Seeing their interest, Ollivander spoke as he finished his work, "On the shelves on your left are the various woods that I use. I allow them to age ten years or so, so the wood is completely dried and they will not warp. I usually cut the pieces into fourteen inch lengths that are about one inch in diameter. When I'm ready to use that piece of wood, I carefully split it into two halves. I cut a channel down the length of each piece to accommodate the magical core and glue them back together later. Naturally the size of the channel varies based on the core to be used. You recall the Delacour witch from the tournament?" Harry nodded. "The wand that she used had the hair of her grandmother, thus the channel would have been quite small."

The wandmaker's words made sense to Harry who asked, "What about Freedom's feather?"

Ollivander replied, "In the case of a phoenix feather, the core is much thicker than most. To give the wand sufficient strength, the shaft tends to be a bit thicker. In the case of your remarkable companion, the feather that she provided is rather more powerful than the one that Fawkes had provided due to the age of the birds."

"What do you mean, Sir?" asked Susan.

“Fawkes was at least fifty years old when he provided the feathers for your wand and for the other one that I made.” They didn’t specifically discuss the owner. Ollivander continued, saying, “In this case, Freedom is barely more than a hatchling. I’m certain that she hasn’t had a burning day yet. As such, the magic in the feather is at its peak. It is my belief that a phoenix’s magic peaks at a year in age and slowly declines throughout the remainder of its life. Back to the point, the feather that she gave you is far more magical than either that Fawkes provided, though it is shorter, as she isn’t yet fully grown.”

He continued talking as he worked, obviously enjoying the company. “The two halves of the wood itself are then glued together. The type of wood is the key that matches the magical foci, in your cast a phoenix feather, with the caster. Once you determine the type of wood then the quantity is determined. Too much wood and the magic does not manifest itself to its fullest. Too little and the wand may be difficult for the witch or wizard to control. Naturally there are also the issues of style and durability. The length is necessitated by the size of magical foci that was used, but also impacts detail work. A healer is likely to select a shorter wand than a hit-wizard.”

Susan asked, “Does a witch or wizard have to use a specific magical foci like a phoenix feather or Veela hair?”

“No,” replied, Ollivander. “Heartstring is frequently used because it is easily available. The foci from this hatchling is easily the most powerful magical object that I’ve ever worked with. To put a point on it, Ms. Bones, it is really a function of availability. In my rather long life, I have only seen four phoenixes and known two that had made a companion of a human. The young woman from Beaubatons probably would have done better with a wand that had a different foci, but in her case, used one that sufficed and had sentimental value. A classmate of yours, Mr. Potter, came in last week to get a replacement for a wand. He was previously using his father’s wand. He ended up with one that had the same foci, but a completely different wood. Certainly he’ll do better with the new one.”

He applied the last coat of lacquer onto Harry’s new wand and said, “This will just need a few more minutes to dry and harden, then it will be ready.” The bell connected to the door rang a few times and

Ollivander said, "Please excuse me for a moment. Someone just came in the front."

As he got up to see who was at the door, Harry's scar flared up again. Susan was about to say something when they heard a voice drawl "Good afternoon, Sir. I was hoping that you could help me. I think I might have cracked my wand."

Harry whispered, "It's Malfoy. I wonder what he's up to?"

As if to answer his question, Malfoy shouted, "*Stupefy*." But the old wandmaker saw it coming, and tried to block the spell with a box.

He turned to cast a spell back at the teen when Snape said, "*Stupefy*." Ollivander was not able to block it and fell to the floor, feet in front of the curtain. Unable to contain his enthusiasm, Malfoy cast "*Crucio*," and the old wandmaker went into convulsions for nearly a minute.

Harry and Susan drew their wands and got up. In his haste, Harry bumped one of the stools and made a noise. Shape hissed, "Draco, use the portkey."

As he was speaking, Harry stooped down, stuck the tip of his wand between the pieces of the curtain and whispered, "*Stupefy*."

Draco was hit in the face and went down, breaking his nose as he landed on the floor.

Harry drew back as Snape cast the killing curse. It hit the curtain, catching it on fire as the mass of energy passed through it, hitting a brick wall and showering them with chips.

Harry thought of his little phoenix. In an instant, she appeared on his shoulder. He thought as hard as he could, '*Go get Auror Connie Hammer*.' Flash! The little bird vanished as soon as she had arrived.

Susan wanted to help Harry and dashed through the curtain. As she did, Snape cast another killing curse. Instinctively Harry picked up the jar of lacquer that Ollivander had used and threw it at Snape causing

him to miss. The spell hit the back shelf blowing several boxes onto the floor.

... -- ...

Back at the Ministry, Hammer and Daily were just finishing up their work when they saw the little phoenix appear next to them in a flash and flutter onto Connie's shoulder. She recognized the phoenix from her visit with Harry and Amelia and knew that the young man needed help. Somehow the thought entered Hammer's mind and she grabbed her camera and told Daily, "Hold onto my hand. Quick!"

In a second flash, the little phoenix had taken them outside Ollivander's. They could see a wand flash through the broken front glass. In an instant they had their wands out.

Snape saw the two aurors outside just as Daily had finished placing an anti-apparation ward down around the building. Draco had the portkey, but was sprawled on the floor out in the open. Effectively he was trapped in a crossfire between whoever was in the back and the Aurors out in front. He took a chance and decided to crash out the front window with the intent of taking a few steps and apparating away as soon as he got out of the warded area that had been set up. He estimated that he had no more than thirty seconds before more help would arrive. He knew that his cover as spy for Dumbledore would be insufficient to get him out of this and escape was his only means of survival.

He fired a flash bang spell that created a bright light and loud noise. While it was effective against Harry, it had done nothing against Susan who had been wearing sunglasses.

As Snape got up and began to crash through the plate glass window, she fired a stunner that barely hit him in the left trouser leg. It wasn't enough to stop him, but it did cause him to lose his balance.

Hammer had faced a killing curse once that day and wasn't going to let it happen to her a second time. As Snape raised his wand to fire at her, she dropped him with a solid *Reducto* hex to the chest. Snape flew back and split his skull against the brick and broken glass. He would die a few minutes later.

... -- ...

Back in the shop, Harry poked his head out of the back again, avoiding the flames. He stunned Malfoy again and got up to kick his wand away. He called, "Help!"

Daily heard the voices inside and burst into the shop. "Drop your wands!" she cried as she entered.

Not having to be told twice, Harry and Susan did as she asked, and said, at the same time. "We're here." Susan added, "Susan Bones and Harry Potter. Mr. Ollivander is hurt."

Daily commanded, "Susan, Harry, come out where I can see you, hands up." They both complied, and Anna said, "Go outside." She used a water jet spray to finish putting out the fire and called out, "Clear."

There was a sizeable crowd that began gathering outside. Harry turned around to look at Anna as he was following Susan out the door. He saw Anna bending down to look at Malfoy. Quick thinking kicked in again for Harry who cried, "Stop! He was trying to snatch Mr. Ollivander. Malfoy and Snape were trying to abduct Mr. Ollivander. He had a portkey on him someplace."

Anna replied, "Thanks," and fired another stunner at Malfoy to make certain that he wouldn't move.

Inside Grimmauld Place, Lupin got the call that there was a Death Eater attack going on in Diagon Alley. He shouted to Hestia, "Firecall the Professor," and took the floo to the Leaky Cauldron.

A moment later, Dumbledore received a message from Hestia, "Attack at Diagon Alley," before her head popped back from the flames. Dumbledore took the same action as Lupin and took the floo to Tom's.

... -- ...

Outside, Auror Straighthand came onto the scene. Hammer shouted, "Get a team of Mediwitches, there are multiple people with injuries."

She called, "*Sonorus*" and said, "Everyone, get back." Removing the charm, she called, "Anna!"

Just then Susan Bones emerged from the building. Hammer saw her and asked, "Susan, are you hurt?"

Susan replied, "No. Mr. Ollivander fell down, injured. He was attacked. Harry is still in there with Auror Daily. Draco Malfoy attacked Mr. Ollivander. Professor Snape tried to kill me then he tried to kill Harry. Harry stunned Malfoy, but Professor Snape had told him to get away using a portkey. We don't know what it is."

Hearing those words, Daily walked back into the shop and as a precaution fired another stunner at Malfoy. The she said, "*Incarcarious*," and a set of thick ropes bound him. Daily was testing the area for portkeys and found a pocketwatch on the floor that tested positive for the charm.

Dumbledore walked into the door and asked, "What happened?"

Daily said, "Good afternoon, Professor Dumbledore. It appears that young Mr. Malfoy here and another man attempted to snatch Mr. Ollivander and in the process tried to commit two murders."

... -- ...

At St. Mungo's the first team of mediwitches had not yet reported back from the attack on the Auror at the ministry building, so head healer Kay Crabtree took the call. Grabbing second year healer trainee Roberta Evans, they grabbed the emergency bags and apparated to just outside of Ollivander's.

Healer Crabtree went to look at Snape and Hammer said, "There are injured inside the shop."

... -- ...

Inside the shop, Daily saw the young healer walk in and said, "Stop."

Momentum carried the young healer another step, but she complied. Daily said, "There are portkeys loose around here that would take you

to places that you don't want to go to. Levitate. Mr. Ollivander outside and work on him outside."

... -- ...

Dumbledore saw Crabtree working on an injured man. Not having heard Susan's story, he was unaware of Severus' part in the attack and assumed that he'd been injured trying to repel the attack. He walked over and bent down to examine him. Dumbledore cast *Enervate* and Snape started to come to. Dumbledore got closer to help him and with a dying effort, Snape reached into his pocket and stuck Dumbledore with a sharp object like a quill. It was the last thing that he ever did. He died a half-minute later.

Dumbledore felt the momentary pain in his leg but was too focused on trying to revive the man to have fully comprehended what happened. He got up and went to see Ollivander. Roberta was rubbing the old wizard's chest with her wand attempting to increase his heart-rate. Harry's little phoenix flashed next to the old wizard and sang a note. Immediately color returned to the old wandmaker's ashen face and his eyes fluttered open. Feeling the tips of the young mediwitch's hair brush his nose, a smile crept onto the old wizard's face.

... -- ...

Dumbledore saw Susan and Harry standing over next to Remus and asked, "Are you both all right?"

Harry nodded and Susan replied, "Yes, Professor."

Dumbledore asked, "If you don't mind my inquiring, what happened?"

Susan gave him the short version. She didn't know about Snape's participation in the Order as Dumbledore's "Spy" and gave a very factual report.

Dumbledore tried to rationalize Snape's actions. There was no justification in trying to kill two people in trying to escape after a botched kidnapping. Even if he had allowed himself to become

involved in an unbreakable oath to protect young Draco and keep him away from the path of darkness, there was no justification.

Not feeling very well himself, Dumbledore was about to leave when Auror Bob Sunset saw him and said, "Professor, the Minister would like to speak with you as soon as possible." Dumbledore nodded and apparated to the Ministry building.

... -- ...

Ignoring Roberta's pleas that he lay still and rest for a few more minutes, Ollivander pulled himself to his feet and went over to see Harry and Susan. Seeing him, she gave him a little hug and asked, "Are you all right, Mr. Ollivander?"

He ran his hand through his wild shock of gray hair and replied, "Thanks to the two of you, I am fine, or will be in a moment." He walked back into his shop and bagged up the wand that he'd been making for Harry along with two wand holsters and two jars of wand polish. He walked back to them and said, "Please accept these from me."

Susan and Harry replied, "Thank you, Sir."

... -- ...

Hammer finished testing the two teen's wands, while Daily logged the results in her logbook. Straighthand came back and asked, "Would you like me to transport the prisoner back to the holding cells?"

Hammer said, "I need to run a few tests and take a few photos first."

Straighthand nodded, removed the ropes and as a precaution, stunned the young blonde wizard. Daily slowly waived her wand over Malfoy's body and announced, "He's clean of portkeys. Check his left leg for another wand."

Straighthand raised Malfoy's trouser leg and found an ankle holster with another wand in it.

As Straighthand was removing the ankle holster from Malfoy, and Daily was photographing it, Moody limped up and gave the area the benefit of his magical eye. He stunned Malfoy before raising his sleeve and pointed to the newly branded Dark Mark on the teen's left inner forearm. He growled, "The piece of filth."

... -- ...

Meanwhile, Hammer had given the two teens their wands back and gotten a preliminary statement from both of them. She said, "Susan, if you wouldn't mind, please tell Amelia that I'll be by later in the afternoon with my reports."

Susan replied, "I will. Would you like to stay for dinner?"

Connie was not the sort of person who had many friends, and truly liked Amelia and her niece. She replied, "If it wouldn't be too much trouble, that would be brilliant. Thank you. Please tell her that I will be by at four."

Susan replied, "I will. Harry, can we go now?" He nodded and with the help of the little phoenix, the two flashed away a moment later.

... -- ...

After looking Draco over and stunning him once more for good measure, Moody continued his search. He looked Snape over with his magical eye and noticed an object in his hand.

He called Daily and Hammer over and had Anna take a photo of the needle-like object that was in his hand. Daily ran her wand over the object and said, "There is a bit of blood on this and something else."

Hammer replied, "Bag it and we'll examine it properly when we get back to the lab."

Daily placed the object in one of the plastic bags, signed it and gave it to Hammer to counter-sign. By then the other mediwitches had arrived, and were ready to bag up Snape's body.

... -- ...

When Harry and Susan arrived back at her home in Welshpool, Amelia was just finishing a firecall with Scrimgeour. She heard them walk in and replied, "I'll find out, and report back with you as soon as I know. It probably will be tomorrow morning. You're welcome." A moment later, she took her head out of the fireplace, and Harry and Susan came over to help her to her feet.

She asked, "How was your day?"

... -- ...

The old wandmaker waited until Daily, Hammer and the others had had their way in his shop before he walked back inside. There was lacquer splashed all over the front floor. He looked and saw his window display had been ruined and the plate glass had been smashed into a hundred pieces.

Ollivander and his ancestors had been in the wandmaking business for over two thousand years. His own mortality hit him like a splash of cold water in the face when he realized what had almost happened today.

Seeing the Aurors display the Dark Marks burned onto the arms of people who most witches and wizards would consider to be decent people, Ollivander realized that the war would get much worse before it got any better. The current war was rapidly growing publicly violent, whereas the first one was focused on kidnappings, with the bodies never to be found. He realized that if Tom Riddle had targeted him once, he would send others.

Ollivander waved his wand and cleaned up the lacquer, gave another flick and created a gentle breeze to cleanse the air of the smell; then cast a repair charm for the window. Within seconds, it had mended itself. After it had settled for a moment, he went and looked at the back room. Fortunately the only thing that he saw out of place was the stool that Harry had knocked over. He righted the stool and replaced the curtain that had caught fire.

Five minutes later, he had put the boxes back in their places and dried up the water that had been sprayed to douse the fire. He went into the back room again, and picked up a few wand boxes and

supplies and put them in his bag. Going back to the counter, he opened his moneybox and dumped the small bag of galleons into his pocket. Then he walked up to the window display, and changed his Open/Closed sign to read Closed.

He walked to the door, cast a few charms before opening the door, and walked outside. He cast a few more charms on the door and went to his vault at Gringotts where he put a few of his more valuable wands and a letter into his vault. He also took out a few bags of gold coins and placed them into his travelling bag. He rode the cart back up into the lobby, and thanked the goblin who had driven the cart. He walked out the front door and apparated away.

... -- ...

After ten minutes or so, Susan had finished telling Amelia what had happened. She had sat there quietly, showing remarkable restraint for a parent, allowing the two teens to fill in the gaps of the story for each other. She noticed that Harry invariably downplayed the significance of his own actions, but related them accurately when Susan prodded him.

After they finished their lunch, she told them, "Immediately preceding the attack at Ollivander's, Lucius Malfoy was killed in the atrium of the Ministry building."

"What happened?" asked Harry.

"Since we've taken to trading state secrets regarding the war, I'll tell you both. I will need your solemn oath that this won't leave the room."

They both nodded.

She began the story saying "Narcissa Malfoy came to Scrimgeour a week ago offering to buy Lucius' freedom, specifically a pardon for the crimes that he may have committed that night in the Ministry. She originally offered three million Galleons, advising Rufus that if he refused her offer, she would spend the money on a legal defense and win his freedom either way."

Harry shook his head in disbelief and said, "Let me guess. She told him that he would claim that he was under snake face's Imperius curse. What a load of dung."

Shocked at his words, she asked, "Exactly what do you mean by that?"

He replied, "Barty Crouch taught us how to break the Imperius curse. Voldemort cast it on me twice that night in the graveyard. He's not that good at it, hardly better than Crouch was."

To say that she was shocked at his words would have been a gross understatement. She asked, "Susan, did he do that in your class too?"

Susan shook her head and said, "No, but he did in Harry's class. Neville told Hannah about it and she told me."

"And you forgot to tell me," said Amelia, rolling her eyes. She continued her story, saying, "After the attack by Crabbe and Goyle, Scrimgeour doubled the asking price and Narcissa Malfoy paid it."

"Why?" asked Harry.

"She claimed that she wanted her husband back and for her son to have a father," replied Amelia.

"No. Why did he even consider the idea?" asked Harry indignantly.

"For the money of course," answered Amelia. "Fudge effectively bankrupted the Ministry. That gold is equal to the entire budget of the Ministry for almost five years. To fight Voldemort and the Death Eaters we need to double the size of the Aurors and train them. Issuing pardons is quite legal."

"You can't fight Voldemort," said Harry.

"Not personally," admitted Amelia. "We need to train more hitwizards and create a strikeforce that would go after Voldemort or at least the Death Eaters."

"If she knows that, why would she offer to give you the gold?" asked Harry.

"Apparently she thought that having Lucius out of prison would allow him to regain their wealth through some other means."

"Either that, or they have a lot more gold banked away than anyone would guess." added Susan.

"Or Voldemort told her to buy his way out. He probably didn't have as much faith in the solicitors as she claimed. So what happened to him?" asked Harry.

"The short of it was that he was released, and assaulted one of the Aurors. He tried to murder one of the others. The first one stopped him by incapacitating him and he bled to death when he pulled her wand out of his throat."

Harry knew that there were comparatively few women in the Auror department and thought that he knew most of them. He asked, "Who was hurt?"

Bones replied, "Auror Nymphadora..."

"Tonks," said Harry, finishing her sentence for her. "We've met."

"The Order?" asked Amelia choosing her words carefully.

Harry nodded saying, "She would go by my aunt's house from time to time to check on it."

Susan commented, "A pity they never went inside to see you. Harry, how could you stand it there?"

"I didn't have a lot of choice. Sirius wanted me to come live with him, but Snape messed it up... Twice, I guess."

Amelia's heart went out to the teen. She sensed that he wanted to get something off his chest and encouraged him. In a gentle voice she prodded, "What happened, Harry?"

“He was the one who heard the first half of the prophecy some sixteen and a half years ago. He told Voldemort and got him chasing after my mum and dad, after me in the first place. He was the one who ruined things when we captured Peter Pettigrew in my third year. Sirius would have been free. He wanted me to live with him after he got his name cleared. Snape ruined it and it never happened. He wouldn’t help us when Umbridge tried to give me a whole bottle of veritaserum or when she tried to curse me.”

Amelia wasn’t sure if Harry was finished and waited a moment. Harry finished saying, “He was always trying to go against me.”

“He’s dead, Harry. Don’t worry about him any more.” She stroked his arm for a minute.

“We kind of got off track, Harry,” said Amelia, filing the veritaserum comment away to talk about later. She added, “We’ll finish our conversation about Snape later. Do you suppose that your... that Freedom would be willing to take us to St. Mungo’s for a few minutes? I’m not up to apparating and I don’t think floo travel would agree with me yet.”

“I think so,” replied Harry. “Hold hands.” He thought of Freedom and she flashed onto his shoulder. A second later the three of them were outside Tonks’ room. Amelia said, “I’ll just check on her and see if she’s up for company.” She greeted the hit-wizard sitting guard outside her door. “Good afternoon, Michael. Have things been quiet?”

“Yes Director. Investigator Hammer was by a few minutes ago, but that was it.”

“That reminds me Auntie,” said Susan. “She was going to stop by our home at four. I invited her over for dinner.”

Amelia smiled indulgently and said, “We’ll have to help Smidgen when we get home then. I’ll just be a few minutes.”

Harry looked down the hall while Amelia was in with Tonks. He was surprised to see Mr. Weasley walk down the hall and go into one of the rooms. “I’ll be right back,” he told Susan. He walked halfway down the hallway and saw the name Molly Weasley on the patient signplate.

He knocked gently on the door and a moment later, Arthur opened the door.

He looked genuinely surprised and said, "Harry, it's... well it's good to see you. We heard that you were...; that you somehow lived. Come in, come in. Molly will be delighted that you stopped by."

Harry walked in and Molly was sitting up looking exhausted. She saw him standing there and a smile leapt onto her face as she held her arms out. He walked over and gave her a hug. She began talking excitedly. "Oh, Harry. I was so worried. We heard that you and Director Bones had been..."

"I'm fine, Mrs. Weasley. Director Bones is getting better. How are you? Were you attacked?"

"I'll be fine Harry. I was just... I'm fine. Thank you." Her eyes lit up and she did look quite a bit better.

An awkward silence took place and Harry said, "I need to go find Susan and to see Tonks for a bit. It was good to see you, Mrs. Weasley. It was good to see you too, Mr. Weasley."

"Thank you for stopping, Harry," replied Arthur walking Harry out the door. "You made her day."

Seeing Arthur with Harry, Amelia walked slowly down the hallway with Susan holding her elbow to steady her. She smiled at Harry and said. "Let's trade patients for a minute Harry. Hello Arthur." Glancing at the nameplate she asked, "Is Molly hurt?"

Harry walked gently knocked on the door frame and said, "Tonks?"

She was sitting up in the bed, with a large bandage on the side of her face. A smile crept onto her face when she saw him. She smirked and asked, "How does it feel to be the boy-who-lived, and-lived-again?" Harry didn't really react since he hadn't seen the papers, so she said, "I was sorry to hear about your Aunt, Uncle, and Cousin, Harry, but I'm glad that you weren't hurt."

Harry replied, "I'm fine. Are you okay?"

Tears welled in her eyes and she shook her head. He got closer and she put her arms out for him to hold her. She sobbed, "I killed a man today Harry. I killed..."

Harry nodded and said, "I know, Tonks. I'm sorry that he hurt you, but I'm *not* sorry that you're alive."

They just held each other for a minute; then there was another knock on the door and Tonks' parents walked in. They saw Harry there and in a voice that held a note of awe in it, Andromeda said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Potter." Ted's eyes gave the familiar flick to Harry's forehead.

Tonks said, "Harry, these are my parents, Ted and Andromeda. Mum, Dad this is my friend, Harry Potter."

"Hello Sir, Ma'am," said Harry who really didn't know what to say.

Harry was grateful when Susan knocked on the door and said, "Auntie's getting a bit tired, Harry. Do you suppose that, oh... excuse me."

Tonks Gave Harry's arm one last squeeze and she said, "Thanks for listening, Harry. I'll see you around."

... --

They got back about an hour before Hammer was supposed to arrive. Amelia felt compelled to justify their actions a bit more. She got Harry and Susan a butterbeer and poured herself a cup of tea.

She asked, "Harry, remember our discussion about wand signatures?"

He nodded.

She continued, "Connie and Anna tested all of the wands after we had talked about it the other day. They had all been removed. Possession of a wand without a registered wand signature is a class one misdemeanor with a maximum sentence of a year. When Minister Scrimgeour signed the pardon papers for any crimes that

Lucius Malfoy committed in the department of mysteries, we knew that he would be re-arrested before he was able to leave the ministry building.”

“So his justification for letting him go was to take away his money? What if he hadn’t picked up his wand? There would have been no way to re-arrest him. What if he’d killed Tonks? What if he got out and killed twenty people the next night? Would the money have still been worth it? Did anyone remember that most of the crimes that he committed that night were against *me*? Was *I* going to get a say in this? Did someone else have to approve this, or did he just do it on his own?” Harry felt that Scrimgeour had really used him.

“Breathe, Harry,” directed Amelia. “I’ll answer as many of your questions as I know the answers to. Professor Dumbledore approved the plan. I was aware of it, but Minister Scrimgeour decided to do it. He didn’t have that many options, Harry. His only other real choice would have been to double the shop tax, and that would have hurt a lot of families too. Sixteen million Galleons is a lot of gold that they could have used against us. Death Eaters get paid too, Harry. It costs a lot of gold to fight a war. Most of the Ministry employees get paid five to fifteen thousand galleons a year. The shop tax barely funds the basic services that the ministry provides.”

“It sounds like a noble thing at sixteen million, but what about three? If Scrimgeour had let him out for a thousand Galleons would that have been right?” asked Harry indignantly

“No,” admitted Amelia, “but if instead of a thousand galleons it had been life in Azkaban, would that have been right? People make decisions Harry.” He knew that she was no longer referring to Malfoy. “Let’s put this behind us, Harry. One Malfoy is dead and another is in custody.”

... -- ...

Harry and Susan went out back when Connie Hammer came over to allow her to talk with Amelia for a while. Harry saw the top of the Long Mountain off in the distance and asked, “Have you ever been there?”

Susan replied "No, but we should get a blanket to sit on if you're planning on asking Freedom to take us there and I'll let Auntie know that we'll be gone for a bit. I'll be right back." She returned a minute later carrying an old blue wool blanket and said, "I'm ready if you are."

A minute later they were at the top of the 1300-foot mountain. Susan found a spot where they could sit and have a nice view. She set the blanket down, handed Harry a butterbeer and commented, "It's beautiful up here."

Harry nodded and replied, "I've never seen anything like it. It's almost like flying."

She sat down and motioned for him to do the same. She said, "Down in the valley below is our house and over to the left is Powis castle. It's not as big as Hogwarts, but we can take a tour sometime. It would be a nice afternoon."

Harry replied, "That sounds like fun."

Susan gave Harry a meaningful look and said, "That was really intense in the wand shop today. I need to thank you."

He asked, "For what?"

"Saving my neck, of course."

Harry shook his head and argued, "Susan, you were there too. I wouldn't have had an easy time against both of them by myself."

"I wonder why Draco did it?"

"Which?" He knew her well enough to realize that she could either be referring to his becoming a Death Eater or the attempted abduction.

"Why would he become a Death Eater?"

Harry replied, "He has always believed that he's better than everyone else. He has always hidden behind, and worshipped, his father. I'd say that he was born into it. Besides, he had Snape there, mentoring him for years."

Susan nodded and commented, "It's too bad. He had a lot going for him."

Harry agreed and said, "Do you want to know the really ironic thing?"

"What?"

"You've got all these Death Eaters who think they're better than everyone. I suppose that a fair number of them are old-line pure bloods who thin that they're powerful people. Yet you get them all together, and they grovel and kiss the robes of a half-blood bastard. Riddle's father was some rich muggle and his mum was a witch who died when he was born. He grew up in some orphanage. He's gathered all of these pure bloods to follow him and spout that pure blood nonsense and it's all a cart of crap. Dumbledore told me that he was about the most brilliant student that he'd ever taught and look how he turned out. I hope Hermione makes more of her life."

"Where is she this summer?"

"Her parents took her to Serbia for a month. I don't know anything about it."

She frowned and commented, "It's a strange place to go on holiday. They're in the middle of a shooting war."

He replied, "So are we."

She put her hand around his. "But it's nice right now."

He stroked her cheek and replied, "It really is."

... -- ...

McGonagall put the parchment down and said, "That was very disturbing, Mr. Crow. You showed us a very ugly side of wizarding politics."

I answered your questions, thought the scribe defensively. No Weasleys have been killed, yet.

“Seven times? What were you thinking?”

He deserved it, thought the storyteller. He was anxious to return to the beach.

“And what of Albus? What about Ollivander?” But he had already fired up the steel horse and ridden away. She saw a scrap of parchment on the floor that he must have dropped by accident. It read *Natasha Vloyski, Storyteller*.

... -- ...

Chapter Ten - Conversations

Freedom flashed Harry and Susan back to their back garden. Susan kissed Harry on the cheek before they went in and said, "Thanks for taking me there, Harry. That was brilliant."

Harry smiled and said, "The view was nice too. We should go in. I want to ask Investigator Hammer something."

Susan said, "All right, but she would probably prefer that you called her Connie."

Harry said, "I take it you've known her for a while?"

Susan nodded and said, "She used to baby-sit me when I was little. She's been at every one of my birthdays that I can remember."

Harry smiled at her, but she could see in his eyes that he was hurting and guessed the reason. She vowed to take away some of the hurt that had been so prevalent in his life.

They walked in to find Amelia and Connie having tea at the table. Amelia asked, "How was the view?"

Harry replied, "Fabulous. We could see for miles."

She said, "Connie was telling me how your little phoenix found her and Anna this afternoon."

Harry said, "She is a fantastic companion. I wanted to thank you for helping us this afternoon. It was pretty intense in there for a while."

Connie replied, "You're welcome, Mr. Potter."

"Harry."

"Connie." They both smiled at each other.

"Dinner's served," announced Smidgen who snapped her fingers and the food appeared in front of each of them. As always, it was delicious.

As they were eating, Harry asked, "Connie, will you look at my wand after dinner?"

Connie replied, "I'd be glad to. What's wrong with it?"

Susan bit her lip; thinking how Hannah would respond to a setup like that.

Harry replied, "Nothing. It's brand new. Mr. Ollivander made it for me this morning, but I don't know if he did the wand signature part before..."

Connie nodded and said, "I understand. I'll look at it after dinner and register it if I need to."

Smidgen had made a small cake for dessert. After they were done, Harry gave Connie his wand and Susan helped Harry bring in the dishes. Harry had seemed obsessed with doing the house chores and Amelia had compromised with him and Smidgen by allowing him to bring in the plates and cups after meals.

They finished a few minutes later and Connie handed Harry his new wand back. She asked, "Have you used this wand yet, Harry?"

He answered, "No. I just got it. Does it work?"

"Work really isn't the right term, Harry. It's more a matter of power or capacity to handle power. Mr. Ollivander has probably forgotten more about wands than I'll ever know. You might ask him some time. You said that he made this wand specifically for you?"

"He finished it this morning. I, rather, Freedom gave him one of her feathers. He told us that it had a lot more magic in it than the one that he got from Fawkes."

"Anyway, you should exercise some caution when you first try it out. It might take some getting used to. Just out of curiosity, why are you switching wands?"

Before Harry could answer, Amelia jumped in saying, "I suggested that he acquire a second wand. I issued him a permit for it." She gave

Harry a meaningful look and he kept silent. "Let's move into the family room where it is more comfortable."

Harry sat on the sofa and Susan sat by him. Amelia and Connie sat in the chairs facing each other by the fireplace. Amelia asked, "Connie, what do you think will happen with Draco Malfoy?"

She replied, "He will be charged with attempted abduction and the use of an unforgivable on an innocent person. Since he is Marked, he will also be charged with being a Death Eater. Given who he is, I expect that he will opt to take the usual Malfoy defense, and claim that he was under the Imperious Curse the entire time."

Amelia nodded and replied, "That would imply that Snape had cursed him and was controlling him the entire time. It really doesn't make a lot of sense to do for an abduction. Connie, Harry brought up an interesting question earlier. Have there been any documented cases of a person receiving the Mark against their will?"

She replied, "If you accept the idea that they carry it as a badge of honor, conscripting someone into the Death Eaters doesn't really make a lot of sense. To put a different slant on it, I'm not aware of anyone denying that they willingly took the Mark. Professor Dumbledore might know more about that than I do."

Harry commented, "So if he took the Mark after school had let out, he's had it less than three weeks."

Hammer replied, "Exactly. That's not a lot of time for him to have aspired to it for years, received it, and have suddenly changed his mind."

Susan asked, "What do you think will happen to him?"

Connie replied, "As I said, he will be charged and tried, probably late in the first week in August. Given the evidence and testimony, I expect that he'll be found guilty of all three charges and sentenced to Azkaban or another prison if the security there is still considered to be an issue. He would get five years for the Mark, ten years for the attempted abduction and most likely life for the use of the Cruciatus

curse on an innocent person. No one is going to convince the Wizengamot that he was forced to take the Mark.”

Susan didn’t say anything. She looked lost in thought.

Connie continued, “I don’t make the law or judge the individual cases. The Wizengamot determines guilt or innocence base on the evidence that we present, then passes sentence. I doubt that Minister Scrimgeour will be convinced to sell a pardon in this case. For one thing, it didn’t work too well with Draco’s father; for another, I’d be surprised if Narcissa or another backer could come up with enough gold to convince Minister Scrimgeour to issue one.”

Susan shook her head and said, “I disagree. I expect that she’d give up her last Knut to keep him out of prison. The question is how much gold can she get her hands on and what would he accept.”

Connie replied, “I don’t know her. Maybe you’re right.”

Harry said, “I met her once. Susan might be right. Draco was always bragging about their manor. Maybe it would fetch a lot of gold if she sold it and moved into a regular sized house.”

Amelia said, “That’s not very common among old family purebloods though she might try to arrange a loan against it or sell something else. If Draco is sent to prison for life, and Lucius and Narcissa held the estate in joint tenancy, she might be able to sell the family estate. Otherwise, Draco probably inherited it and she would be unable to sell it unless he writes her a power of attorney.”

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment and remarked, “Having a big manor won’t do him much good if he’s sitting in prison. Having one didn’t do Sirius much good.”

Amelia replied, “No, but on a happier note, it made your friend Professor Lupin quite a wealthy man. There was a listing of the wizarding properties sold this week in this morning’s paper. Number twelve, Grimmauld Place sold yesterday for 1.4 million Galleons at an auction.”

Harry lit up and he exclaimed, "That's brilliant! Remus will have enough to get by on for the rest of his life, and be able to find a nice place to live. I'm happy for him, but that doesn't mean that Malfoy would do the same thing."

Amelia replied, "Harry, that's more than enough to get by on, but back to the topic. Please keep in mind that there are different types of power. Wealth is one type. If you can legally remove some of that power from those who would do evil with it, most people would say that you have accomplished something. It costs a lot of money to wage a war."

Harry suggested, "Look at it this way; Malfoy and Snape probably tried to snatch Mr. Ollivander on Snake Face's orders. If they are publicly shown to have failed, and are dead, or on their way to prison for a long time, maybe it will make others think twice."

Marveling at his comment, Connie shook her head and said, "I respectfully disagree with you Harry. Every idiot who ever commits a crime believes that they will be the *one person* to get away with that particular crime, no matter what percentage of people have previously gotten caught. In my opinion, you have to get them off the street and the Wizengamot has to give them a trial and leave them in prison. We're treating them like criminals who we believe that we can somehow rehabilitate to our liking. They're not shoplifters. It's a civil war and they are soldiers. We aren't going to change their minds."

Amelia added, "True, but given the framework that the Wizengamot has given us, the criminal laws are what we have to work with."

Harry asked, "Who can change that?"

Amelia replied, "The Wizengamot could if someone convinced to do something."

Connie said, "Harry, that someone might be you."

Harry shook his head in disbelief and said, "I have no authority to tell them what to do. I'm not even a prefect."

Stifling a laugh, Amelia said, "Harry, Connie wasn't talking about the power of authority, she was referring to influence. While you may not realize it, and certainly haven't abused, let alone thought of abusing it; you are unquestionably the most influential wizard in Britain."

Harry protested, "Professor Dumbledore..."

"*Had a hand* in creating most of the laws written in the last thirty years, Harry. The reality is that the Ministry was losing badly during Voldemort's first rise to power. The Professor and Barty Crouch were seriously at odds regarding the treatment of the Death Eaters then, and as a result, *far* too many of them slithered their back into decent society, and more than a few found their way into the ranks of the Ministry. I agree with Connie; the Ministry needs to respond as if this were a war, not a series of unrelated criminal acts. The Wizengamot makes policy, Harry, but they would accept direction from a strong leader. This is nothing that you need to act on tonight, but give it some thought. Besides, it's late and it has been a long day."

... -- ...

As the Bones dinner was winding down, Minerva read the special edition and put the paper down. The ugly war was getting uglier. She thought of the proud and once respectable Malfoy line that appeared to be at an end. She was against the longstanding wizarding practice of purchasing pardons but could not comprehend how, once released, Lucius chose to wait less than a minute to attempt to commit another murder. There was no doubt in her mind that Scrimgeour set up a provocation; the same tactic that Malfoy's son was so good at, yet she was surprised that Lucius had taken the bait. She was not proud of the things that Scrimgeour was doing, but no one would accuse him of sitting there like a potted plant.

She reread the article about the attempted abduction at Ollivander's. At the same time she was proud of Harry and Susan and profoundly disappointed in Sev... in Snape. Albus had insisted in sticking up for the man for years in the face of mounting evidence indicating, at a minimum, he was playing both sides and more likely had sided with... Voldemort. She decided that if her Harry could face him again and

again, she would give up that ridiculous hyphenation business and call him Voldemort or Riddle.

On happier note, she hoped that Albus would find a person who was actually skilled at teaching for the potions position.

... -- ...

Scrimgeour looked at the newspaper with some relief. The *Daily Prophet* had articles on both Malfoy's, with photographs. With luck, much of the attention would be drawn away from his very questionable deal with Mrs. Malfoy and back to Dumbledore's controversial insistence on maintaining Snape as a staff member. He looked at the photo of Harry Potter and twice in a week was relieved that the teen with remarkable reflexes had been on the scene.

It also relieved him that with young Draco occupying the holding cell that Lucius had been in only hours before, Narcissa might be less aggressive. A part of him wished that she had another family vault to empty.

He decided that Potter, Amelia's niece, and the three Aurors should each get ten, no fifty thousand Galleons each and an award for their part in bringing in the Death Eaters. Certainly the gold was excessive, but he rationalized, the sixteen million that she had wasted securing the release of her husband had essentially been found money.

As long as he was at it, he would earmark four, no eight million, of the golden galleons for reward money that he would peg at a rate of fifty thousand per head. If it incited a rash of vigilantism, so be it.

What he really needed was an increase in the sentence for simply being a marked Death Eater. Dumbledore would no longer be able to point to Snape as being the case-in-point that they can be reformed into upstanding citizens or were simply misguided, as Fudge used to spew about Malfoy.

The combination of rewards and a get-tough sentencing law would turn the corner on the attractiveness of joining that lunatic's cause.

He left the office that evening, a happy man.

... -- ...

Becky Abbott read the morning paper with a measure of amazement. Susan and Harry had foiled a Death Eater attack; a Hogwarts head of house was really a Death Eater and had tried to kill them and abduct Mr. Ollivander. Related to that news, she was unsurprised to find two teaching positions available in the *Daily Prophet*. One was for a potions professor and the other was yet another listing for a defense instructor with current teaching experience in the subject desired.

The fireplace flashed green for a moment and Susan's head popped in. "Hi, Mrs. Abbott. Is Hannah home?"

"She's out back sunbathing, Susan. Come on over."

A few seconds later, Susan walked through the fireplace and dusted herself off for a moment.

Becky got up and gave her a hug, saying, "I read about your adventure at Ollivander's. Are you both all right?"

Susan nodded her head and admitted, "I was so scared."

Becky replied, "I can't even imagine. What happened?"

"We were visiting with Mr. Ollivander and they came in and attacked him. Harry stunned Draco Malfoy and Professor Snape tried to kill Harry and me. Harry held him off and Snape crashed through the display window and got himself killed. They were trying to abduct Mr. Ollivander."

Hannah walked in, saw her best friend, and gave her a hug. After retelling the story again and catching up for a few minutes, Hannah asked, "Where's Harry?"

Susan said, "He's talking with one of the hit-wizards watching the house for the rest of the summer."

With a glint in her eye, Hannah asked, "How are things working out with you and Harry?"

Susan nodded and said, "He took me up to the top of Long Mountain yesterday. It was so cool."

"And?"

"I kissed him."

"And?"

"We held hands. Hannah, he doesn't have wandering hands like Ernie or Leon. I think he was so mistreated by his relatives, he... doesn't... know... Put it this way, yours were the first that he'd ever seen."

"The real question, *Professor Bones*," teased Hannah with a straight face and ignoring her comment, "is he a *willing* student?" She tossed Susan her terrycloth robe so she could come out and join her out back.

Susan nodded and answered, "He's *very* willing; he just needs to get used to the idea of a family where there is unconditional love. I'll need to practice with him of course, but he'll be just fine. Seriously, I don't know how to explain it."

The teasing banter dropped, Hannah nodded and replied, "One moment we're just sitting there minding our own business, and the next he's saving someone else. First me, then Auntie; now you. It's like he's just meant to save people. It's just what he does, I guess."

"He's so sweet. Anyway, that's why I came over..."

... -- ...

"Faster."

Ministry hit witch Michelle Wood has set up a holographic image machine that would randomly pop up a display of either bad guys or innocents in one of five locations about twenty five feet in front of Harry. His job was to fire stunners at the bad guys without accidentally firing at the good guys, much like a muggle arcade game. For nearly five minutes she had been displaying images about every

other second. She had started at five second intervals; then decreased it to four second intervals after a minute. After three minutes she cut it to two and a half seconds and a minute ago cut it to two second intervals.

She saw the sweat drip off the teen's chin as he remained focused. Finally at about six minutes the counter recorded one hundred and she stopped.

"Take a break Harry," she said pointing to a small bucket of butterbeers in ice. "I'll just be a minute."

She tallied the results a second time. Of the one hundred images, ninety had been bad guys. Of those, Harry hit eighty-six; a remarkable number for any auror cadet. Of the ten good guy images, Harry hadn't cast a spell at any; again a much better result than most third year cadets.

Harry opened his second butterbeer as she sat down. He handed it to her and opened another for himself. "Thanks," she said. "How are you feeling?"

Harry replied, "That was pretty intense. I was getting tired towards the end."

"Harry, most witches or wizards would get winded after casting twenty-five or so spells in that time period. The exercise was as much about measuring concentration and eye-hand co-ordination as sheer spellcasting. You're very good in this area. If you want, I can make you better."

Harry nodded a yes, but didn't say anything.

"You did as well in the defensive practices that we did earlier. Apparently playing seeker has paid off for you. Anyone can cast a shield, but it takes energy to do so, and as you know, the shields that you would normally cast won't block some of the nastiest spells. Also, it's all but impossible to cast an offensive spell at the same time that you are casting a shield, so it's usually better to be able to dodge an unfriendly spell if you can."

Harry understood what she had said, and was feeling a bit better. He said, "So you're basically saying, don't cast a shield spell if they're going to miss you anyway."

She looked at him and replied, "Exactly. Would you be willing to try this again tomorrow?"

Harry replied, "Sure." Then he had an idea and asked, "Could you bring one of those solicitor pensieves tomorrow? I want to show you something."

She answered, "No problem, I'll bring one, and thanks for popping those two idiots the other day and saving Director Bones. She has a lot of respect among the rank and file."

Harry nodded, and said "She's always been more than fair with me and has been really generous this summer, letting me stay in her home." He looked at her for a second and said, "You look familiar. Were you in Hogwarts?"

She nodded and replied, "I finished when you were done with second year. I was in Ravenclaw, but you know my younger brother, Oliver."

"Sure," answered Harry. "What's he doing now?"

"He's playing for Birmingham."

Harry replied, "That's great. He really... took the game seriously."

"Obsessed is a bit closer to the mark, but you're right. I'll say hello from you the next time I see him."

Harry asked, "Michelle, would it be possible for Susan to do this as well?"

She hesitated and replied, "I'm fine with it, but it really would be between her and Director Bones. It's obvious that you have the skills and the motivation to really get better. I'll bring it up after dinner if that's okay with you?"

Harry nodded and said, "Thanks."

... -- ...

Harry and Susan had volunteered to go to the Ministry and pick up a box of papers for Amelia. Freedom took them to the Atrium and they walked to the lifts. They went to the second floor and got out. Susan said, "Hi, Randi."

The young receptionist looked up and smiled. "Hi Susan. It's good to see you. I read about you and, oh, hello Mr. Potter. I didn't see you. Good afternoon."

Harry smiled and said, "You two go and finish. I'll just sit here for a bit." In fact, he was used to a lifetime of being ignored, but hadn't consciously realized it.

Susan didn't ignore him and found him a minute later. She whispered, "Thanks for giving us a minute to catch up. Randi was in school with me, three years ahead of us."

Harry replied, "I met her a week ago. She seems nice."

She gave his arm a quick squeeze and replied, "She's been a good friend since I was a first year. In her eyes I was never anyone's niece, just Susan." They waited a minute and Randi returned with a briefcase of papers. She said, "Thanks for stopping Susan. It was nice to see you again, Mr. Potter."

They both replied, "Bye," as they left and got on the lift. They were both surprised to see Minister, Scrimgeour and Susan said, "Good afternoon, Sir."

He looked up and said, "Hello Susan. Harry, Can you come to my office for just a minute?"

"Yes Sir," replied, Harry and the three of them walked back to his office.

When they got to his receptionist, Scrimgeour said, "Susan, we won't be but a minute." When they got to his office, he closed the door and said, "First, I want to congratulate you for your quick thinking at

Ollivander's. You helped take two more Death Eaters off the streets and saved a good man."

"Thank you, Sir, but Susan and Investigator Hammer were there too."

"True," admitted Scrimgeour, "and that comes to my point. I have decided that the Ministry will begin giving out cash rewards for the capture of any marked Death Eater. I will be having a small reward presentation this Saturday morning at eleven and I'd like you to come."

This was not an area that Harry was comfortable with. He wished that Susan or Amelia were here. Sensing his hesitation, Scrimgeour set the hook saying, "Harry, each person will receive a reward of fifty thousand Galleons. That gold will be yours to keep and use as you will. I know that the money might not be that important to you, but for the others who will receive it, it will make a big change in their life. A lot of bad things have happened in this war, Harry. It is an opportunity to show that people can *help themselves* and *fight back*. This can be a good thing. I won't be asking for any speeches, and there won't be any photographs, well maybe only one, but the other people won't be photographed for their safety. Is that a deal?"

He had played Harry well, and the teen readily agreed. In return he only had asked that he pardon that fool of a bus attendant, Stan Shunpike.

... -- ...

McGonagall looked at the latest report a second time rereading the various details. She said, "You recorded some very revealing conversations, Mr. Crow."

The old scribe nodded, thinking of the glasses that one of his fellow scribes had offered to loan him. He was anxious to gather information about the upcoming gathering at Folkestone.

However, McGonagall crooned, "You failed to mention anything new regarding Albus, Mr. Ollivander, or the Grangers."

The old scribe thought to himself, *'She never told us what happened to him either. Nobody scolded her.'*

As he was getting ready to leave he pressed a scrap of paper in her hand. A moment later the V-Twin fired and he was gone.

McGonagall looked at it and read, *Hahukum Konn – A knut to start the revolution.* She put it in her bag and said, "Ride safely, Mr. Crow."

Chapter Eleven – Back to the Atrium Wednesday 24 July

As Albus was walking to the great hall for breakfast he reflected on the last few weeks. Much had happened. The magical wards surrounding Privet Drive somehow degraded and were breached, causing the destruction of the Dursleys. The hatchling phoenix daughter of Fawkes met Harry and started the journey towards a lifelong relationship. Harry had been taken in by Amelia Bones and appeared to be having a pleasant summer holiday.

Things were active at the ministry. In an inspired move, Minister Scrimgeour stripped the Malfoys of their fortune. Then, of their own doing, the Malfoy family imploded. Lucius got himself killed and young Draco made poor choices and would soon find himself in prison for the rest of his life.

Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle also got themselves killed in a failed attempt to assassinate Amelia Bones. Finally Severus Snape was killed in a failed attempt to abduct Ollivander.

Voldemort certainly wasn't sitting still for the month, nor did Dumbledore have any illusions that he wouldn't try again. He was relieved that Amelia had accepted his suggestion that a hit wizard be stationed at her home for the remainder of the summer.

Dumbledore had not felt well for the last several days and hoped that the dizziness and headaches that he'd been experiencing were merely the result of the last few days of rainy weather. Hopefully the forecasted week of sunny and hot weather would improve his health.

He started to read his morning mail as he ate. The trials for the Death Eaters had finally been scheduled enmass, to begin in two weeks. He was certain that Amelia would be at the top of her game preparing for what was likely to be a well-funded defense. He noticed that the trial of Draco was scheduled for the morning of Monday 5 August, two days before the others.

He glanced up and saw that Minerva and Poppy were busy chatting away as they came down to eat. "Good morning ladies, how are you both?"

“We’re fine, Albus,” replied Poppy. “Haven’t you looked through your mail yet?”

“I was just doing that, Poppy. Is there something that I should notice?”

“Albus,” remarked Minerva in a bit of frustration, “look at the letter from Becky Abbott. It will be the best event of the summer.”

Dumbledore found the envelope in question and opened the letter. His eyes gave an extra twinkle as he finished reading it. He replied, “It does sound like a fine time. Is there any indication who else was invited?”

Poppy replied, “Hagrid, Pomona and Filius were invited, as well as most of the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor upperclassmen. I also understand that there were some others from the defense club that Potter started last year. I had the chance to firecall Becky this morning. She’s invited a few people from the ministry, Remus, the Grangers, the Weasleys, Tom and Nob from the Leaky Cauldron and a few of the students from Beaubattons that they met during the Triwizard tournament.”

Dumbledore nodded and replied, “It sounds like a splendid day. I’ll go early and be back in time to allow the rest of you to enjoy the afternoon and evening at the event.”

Poppy carefully looked at Dumbledore for a moment, saw something that she didn’t like in his eyes, and asked, “Not to change the subject, Albus, but maybe you should stop up and see me this afternoon. Have you been feeling well lately?”

“I haven’t been at the top of my game of late,” admitted Dumbledore. “Would three p.m. be convenient?”

Poppy nodded and went back to talking with Minerva again. Seventy-year-old women were rarely invited to birthday parties for famous young men, and there were things to plan. Without question, it would be the wizarding social event of the summer.

... -- ...

Back at Welshpool, Amelia and Harry were finishing breakfast. She said, "Thank you for suggesting that Susan do some training with Michelle. I know I have the habit of still seeing her as a first year, and in these times, everyone needs to know how to take care of themselves."

Harry nodded and asked, "Did she get a use of magic permit too?"

Amelia replied, "Yes. They're really not that hard for a sixteen-year-old witch to get. You just need to fill out the proper form, have your parent or guardian sign it and send in ten Galleons for a background check." She choose not to tell him that the usual reason was so the young witch could cast contraceptive charms on herself.

Harry nodded, and replied, "That's good. They never mentioned any of the different forms at school."

Amelia was thoughtful for a moment and replied, "I suppose not. It's just assumed that parents would advise their children as needed."

Harry replied, "But the muggleborn witches and wizards can't get that kind of advice from their parents. They wouldn't know anything about it."

"I suppose that you're right Harry, but I really can't see Hermione Granger's parents coaching her on how to apparate."

Surprised, Harry asked, "How do you know her?"

Amelia replied, "I only know the name, really. She and Susan have taken Arithmancy together. They have owled each other a few times in the last few summers, and I saw her name on the Auror reports regarding the Death Eater raid at the department of mysteries. We spoke for perhaps half of a minute that night." She took a sip of her tea and said, "Harry, I wanted to ask you a few other things if that was all right?"

Harry replied, "Sure. What's first?"

"Are you all right with Minister Scrimgeour putting on his little dog and pony show this Saturday in the atrium?"

Harry nodded and replied, "Yes. He told me that he had awards to give to some other people, and if I accepted mine, they would get theirs. I'm fairly certain that it will come out in the *Daily Prophet* that *"Harry Potter and several unnamed witches and wizards received recognition awards for their part in what-ever."* To answer your question, its fine with me."

"Okay. Secondly, you mentioned in passing several actions taken by Delores Umbridge last year that were clearly illegal. The administration of veritaserum without authority is prohibited and is a felony. The use of a blood quill as you described it would be a misdemeanor. However it sounded like there were multiple occurrences both with you and with other students. Is that true?"

Harry replied, "Yes. Professor McGonagall records a log of all detentions given. It would list all of the dates if that would be helpful. Also, Umbridge told me that she sent those dementors after me last summer while she was in front of a half-dozen other people. She also committed offenses against Hagrid and Professor McGonagall."

Amelia replied, "I know Harry, and I'm not minimizing them, but her actions against you will be the easiest to prosecute. I want her removed from her position and put in a situation where she can never harm a young witch or wizard again."

Harry replied, "I understand. How can I help?"

"Connie will come by tomorrow and take a deposition from you and then get one from Professor McGonagall. That should be the extent of your involvement."

"Okay. What else?"

"I was going to ask you what career advice have you ever received, or what plans have you considered after you finish at Hogwarts?"

Harry replied, "I sort of had a discussion with Professor McGonagall, but Umbridge told me that I'd never get any sort of position. To be honest, I really don't know that much about what most witches or wizards do. One of Ron's brothers watches after dragons, another is a cursebreaker for Gringotts. The twins started a joke shop.

Michelle's brother plays quidditch. Tonks is an Auror, Madam Pomfrey is a healer, Luna's dad runs a newspaper and Professor McGonagall is a teacher. Those are really all of the professions that I know of. Beyond that, I have the Voldemort thing to worry about."

She didn't comment about the "Voldemort thing," as he put it but said, "Let's frame it in muggle terms – you can open a business or you can work for someone else. You can also work for the ministry. There are jobs in healthcare, education, banking, or the research of spells. You could be a wealthy bounty hunter if Scrimgeour keeps his program up. You could become a storyteller like Lockhart. The only difference is your adventures could be filed under the non-fiction section. You should check into your family vault first, Harry. You might need to get working almost as soon as you finish school, or you might never need to work a day on your life."

Harry replied, "I don't really understand. Sirius left me something, but I haven't checked into it. I've been to my vault. It's number 687. I checked and it has fourteen thousand galleons in it. That's nice, but it doesn't sound like a fortune."

"True," replied Amelia, "but we'll use the Bones family as an example. When Susan's parents were murdered, they had their personal vault that Susan inherited. Her parents were so young at the time that they hadn't yet set up a school vault for Susan, so she didn't have her own. The Bones family vault is currently controlled by myself as the head of this branch of the family. In the event of my death, she would stand to inherit it. The Bones family never had the wealth that some of the families do, but like most of the wizarding world, we own sections of land."

Smidgen handed Harry a small tray of biscuits and a butterbeer. Harry thanked the little elf, and Amelia continued, "Based on the vault number, the vault that you are accessing most likely is your school vault. Dumbledore mentioned your family vault as being part of the Potter trust. The reason I bring it up Harry is so you make informed decisions for the rest of your schooling at Hogwarts and beyond. In all probability, you don't need to work as a bounty hunter simply for the money or as an Auror simply because it pays better than an equivalent position in another ministry position. You may want to sign

up for the estate management elective class at school, or you may decide to become the defense instructor because it interests you. My point is that you have good skills, a good name, some family money and literally thousands of options to choose from. I would be happy to help you in whatever direction you should choose.”

Grateful at her words, Harry replied, “Thank you Amelia, very much. It’s situations like this where having parents or a godfather would have come in handy. I really do appreciate your advice. Is there anything else you want to talk about right now?”

“Just a handful of topics for right now, first, regarding the trials for the Death Eaters, you and your other school friends will be the primary witnesses. They are being charged with three basic sets of crimes – being marked Death Eaters, illegal entry into a restricted ministry area, and assault on innocents or in some cases resisting arrest if they dueled any of the Aurors. If any of them fired unforgeables, they will be charged with those crimes as well. Connie and Anna have run the spell checkers on the various wands that we collected. Several of the wands had signatures, so it will be easy enough to track who they belonged to. We can infer that each Death Eater had at least one wand.”

Harry asked, “Why not simply use fingerprints?”

“I would, but they have never been made admissible in wizarding court. That’s another needed change at the Wizengamot, but back to the subject. Naturally, you will end up being one of the key witnesses. The lead prosecutor in this case will be me. The trials will be enmass, meaning that since they are interrelated, they will be held simultaneously. The accused will have their individual charges read to them one at a time. They will have the opportunity to respond to each of the individual charges. Collective testimony will be given by yourself, Neville Longbottom, Connie, Tonks and Moody.”

Harry asked, “What about the others?”

She replied, “They will be available. Their depositions will be admitted as part of the body of evidence. They will be available for cross-examination. Ideally we’ll be able to keep their photos out of the *Daily*

Prophet. We'll talk more about this later, but I wanted to give you an overview of the process."

"One question back; why Neville? Why not Hermione?"

"Several reasons. He was still standing at the end of the battle. Our evidence photos show him quite bloodied up and he has a good reputation among the Wizengamot members."

"But Hermione was hurt the worst."

"True, but the young lady would probably not wish to have a photo of her scar displayed on the front page of the *Daily Prophet*."

It took Harry a moment to picture Amelia's meaning, his face grew red and he replied, "Right. Was there was something else that you wanted to ask about?"

She looked at his unruly hair, smiled and suggested, "Harry, I have at least a million questions for you. Let's not count. This prophecy that you heard; let me ask you a question which you may not have considered. Do you even believe it to be true?"

"I'm not sure. I suppose half of the point is that Riddle believes it. He murdered my parents over it and Sirius died because of it."

Just then Michelle walked in and said, "Susan is resting right now, Mr. Potter. Did you want to try the simulator again?"

Harry nodded and asked, "Did you also bring the solicitor pensieve?"

"Yes. Would you like me to bring it in?"

"Please. Amelia, I think you and Susan might want to see this too."

She came back in a minute later with Susan, who looked exhausted. When she had set it up Harry said, Michelle and I were talking about shields and dodging spells yesterday. I saw an interesting shield spell and I thought that you all might want to see it. He pulled the memory from his head and carefully looped it into the dish. It was the battle between Dumbledore and Riddle from the atrium.

None of them had personally seen more than a glimpse of the duel. Harry showed them what happened, beginning with Dumbledore animating the statues to block the killing curses that Riddle was throwing at Harry to the fire whips. Dumbledore sent a particularly powerful hex at Riddle who had created the brass shield that deflected the hex with a rather loud clang. Harry was about to stop the memory, but Amelia said, "Wait Harry. Let it play."

They watched in horror as Riddle had possessed Harry who uttered the words, "*Kill us, Dumbledore.*" Harry remembered the blinding pain and remembered thinking about Sirius. Suddenly, Riddle's body jerked and he grabbed Bellatrix and activated a portkey to quickly get away.

Amelia said, "Michelle, what you saw and have heard is never to leave this room. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Director."

"Harry, what did you do that made him leave so quickly? He obviously wasn't done torturing you."

"I guess I started thinking a happy thought. I was thinking that I might get to see Sirius and my parents again after he killed me."

Tears welled in each of the women's eyes at his words. Susan gave his arm a squeeze and whispered in his ear, "Harry, I promise I will give you a much happier set of memories to beat that bastard with."

Amelia guessed her niece's words and thought, '*You two are good for each other.*'

Michelle said, "I'll look into the shield that he used for you. Let's go outside."

... -- ...

"One fifty. Put your wand down. Harry, that was good. You had four misses and didn't hit any friendlies. Take a break for a few minutes and we're going to try something different."

Harry gulped down his butterbeer and reached for a second bottle before the hit wizard had even turned around. By the time she sat down, the scruffy haired teen was seriously looking at a third bottle.

Half teasing, half pushing him, she said, "Okay, that's enough sitting around for a few minutes. This won't take too long. Stand back where you were."

Harry walked back to where he had been.

"Ready?"

"Sure."

Instead of one image popping up, two appeared about ten feet apart. Harry aimed at the one on the right, called *Stupefy*, then whipped his wand to the left and did the same.

"Too slow. Get ready to try again."

"Wait a second." Harry pulled out his second wand and said, "Okay."

Michelle smiled as he pulled out a second wand. He obviously didn't know that no matter how many wands you carried, you could only cast one spell at a time. She waited a second and tapped the rune that indicated stations one and three.

Harry saw the two images, and aimed both wands. He called *Stupefy* and hit the right image but missed with the left. He felt drained from casting the spells and said, "Sorry, I missed."

Amazed at what she's seen, Michelle said, "I'll flash them in stations one and two. Actually take a break for a second. I need to use the loo. I'll be right back."

"Okay."

She trotted into the house and called, "Director Bones?"

Bones was reviewing budget requests at her study desk and asked, "What is it, Michelle?"

She replied, "Watch out the window for a minute." She went back out and said, "Okay stations one and two. Ready?"

Harry nodded and she flashed the bad guy images at the first two stations. Harry fired and hit both images at the same time.

She said, "Again. Ready?"

Harry felt tired, but nodded. He fired again and hit both images.

"Good Harry. Sit down and take a break. You did well. Actually, let's call it a day. I'll find Susan, and the two of you can take a swim. I'll put the equipment away." He nodded and finished his butterbeer while she went back inside. When she got in the kitchen, Amelia was standing at the window watching. Michelle asked, "Did you see that?"

Amelia nodded and replied, "*That* was remarkable."

Michelle replied, "The truly incredible part is he did that after firing over a hundred and thirty stunners in under seven minutes! I gave him no more than a five-minute break in between. He must have the largest magical core that I've ever seen."

Bones said, "I've only heard of one other wizard who could cast two spells simultaneously."

"Who was that?"

"Grindelwauld."

Michelle commented, "I suppose this falls under the "state secrets" category, too?"

Bones nodded and replied, "It does."

... -- ...

Outside, Susan found Harry snoozing in one of the lounge chairs. She walked up to him wearing her blue bikini, leaned over and gave him a quick kiss, then said, "Hi, Sleepy."

Harry opened his eyes, reached up and felt her long strawberry blonde hair in his fingers. He smiled and said, "Hi, back."

She noticed his eyes peeking at her and smiled. She hoped that he liked what he saw. She never thought of herself as a beauty like Hannah, but she had grown to be self-confident and was comfortable with herself. She had dated a few times in the last two years within the confines of the castle, but had never had any particular attraction to any of the young wizards who had sought her attention.

She hoped that her relationship with Harry would continue to progress. If she was honest with herself, she knew that if it didn't work out for some reason, no other wizard could ever measure up.

... -- ...

Saturday morning, an hour before the awards ceremony was to begin, Delores Umbridge was surprised to see Aurors Strighthand and Sunset knock on her office door. She was an important witch in spite of Fudge's sacking and now that she was back in her office everyday and away from that retched school, she had a lot to do.

She looked up to dismiss the intruder, saw that it was one of the senior aurors and decided against being rude. In her sweet voice, she asked, "Can I help you?"

Strighthand replied, "Actually Ma'am you can. Stand up, please. Place your wand on the desk. You are under arrest."

She croaked, "*What?*"

"Ma'am, you are under arrest for unauthorized administration of a controlled substance in lethal doses, inappropriate direction of a restricted ministry resource with intent to harm a person, and sixteen counts of reckless endangerment of a student. Stand up and place your wand on the desk."

"I will *not*. Get out of my office. He's nothing but a lying, attention seeking brat."

Straighthand was beginning to hope that she would try something stupid and announced, "This is your last chance, Ma'am. Stand up, and place your wand on the desk. In ten minutes you will be sitting in one of the holding cells. How you get there is up to you." He was standing in front of her while Sunset had taken a few steps and was off to the side ready to strike if she made an aggressive move.

Surprising Straighthand and disappointing Sunset, she complied and Sunset sealed her office door as they left. Bob had the extreme displeasure of searching her while Straighthand completed the paperwork. When they were done, they hurried upstairs to see the presentation. The senior investigators would search her office in the afternoon.

... -- ...

Scrimgeour was loving the moment. Here was his first big press covered event since becoming minister, and it was for something positive. Less than a month into office, and he was able to demonstrate results. He had told the *Daily Prophet* and the magazines in the strongest terms to keep Susan Bones' photo and name out of the paper, in exchange for his promise that they could ask Potter one question each. Seated in the front row of the atrium were Amelia, Harry, Susan, Tonks, Connie and Anna. Dumbledore was several rows back along with McGonagall and Sprout. In between were mostly Aurors, Moody, a few shopkeepers and a few civilians who Scrimgeour didn't recognize.

Fortunately Scrimgeour didn't talk just to hear his own voice. He kept his remarks to five minutes and had five goblins wheel five small carts out. Each cart contained fifty thousand galleons. Each coin was about the size of a British one pound coin and in an uncompressed, unmagical state they made sizeable piles of gold. Daily's eyes dazzled when she saw the stack and the card beside it that had her name on it. As she reached to touch the pile, her colleagues stood and applauded. She and Hammer were well respected within the Aurors. Hammer was expected to be named department head when the department wide meeting was held August 1. Tonks was speechless. In the entire time that she had been at the ministry, both as an auror trainee and finally as an auror, she had yet to earn a total

of the fifty thousand Galleons, she had been handed in one day, tax free.

Scrimgeour was at his best, orchestrating the pace of the meeting. He was satisfied acting as the moderator. He had described the crimes that the dead Death Eaters had committed, holding open the possibility that Narcissa would make an offer for the Malfoy teen. He took some pleasure in pinning a dozen unsolved violent acts on Snape, constantly referring to him as "Professor Snape." However, he knew better than to beat on that drum too long, lest he completely burn his bridges with Dumbledore. It was time to bring out the main event. He pointed at Harry and said, Mr. Potter, could you come up for a few minutes?"

Harry had been looking around the atrium, considering the different battles that had taken place there in the last half dozen weeks. He obediently came up, and Scrimgeour announced, "It may come as no surprise, but Mr. Potter was involved in taking each of the four Death Eaters off of the streets. Would you be willing to answer a few questions?"

Harry nodded and replied, "Go ahead."

A witch stood and said, "Mr. Potter, Rianna Turpin, *Teen Witch Weekly*. Are you dating anyone right now?"

Harry replied, "That's a bit personal. Please ask a different question."

She asked, "What was it like then you saw he who-must-not-be-named in the atrium?"

Harry replied, "Really scary." The audience gave a nervous laugh.

Scrimgeour said, "Next person, please."

An older wizard stood and said, "Ron Wilson, *Which Broomstick*. Mr. Potter, has the ridiculous lifetime quidditch ban that was placed on you been lifted and, if so, do you plan on returning to your spot as seeker on the Gryffindor team this autumn?"

Harry replied, "I haven't heard about the removal of Professor Umbridge's decrees, and the team won the cup without my playing in the last two games. I doubt I could even get my spot back."

Dumbledore considered saying something, but wanted to see how Harry carried himself, and choose not to interrupt.

Scrimgeour announced, "Next person, please."

A witch stood and said, "Cheryl Whiteheart, *Witch Weekly*. Mr. Potter, what is your reaction to people calling you "*The Chosen One*" and do you believe that you are destined to end the war?"

Harry had been coached a bit before coming to the meeting and was ready for this sort of question. He replied, "I don't subscribe to any publications, and the only choices my relatives ever gave me was which chore to do first in the morning. As to your second question, I will do my best to end this war, just like everyone here."

He hadn't really answered her question, but had tried to reflect the activities needed to end the war back to the aurors. He had no intention of discussing the prophecy to a bunch of reporters.

Scrimgeour called for the next person and Harry saw Rita Skeeter stand. She said, "Hello Harry. My question is, now that you have been declared an adult and head of the Potter house, do you have plans on claiming the Potter seat at the Wizengamot?"

Harry replied, "I wasn't aware that my family had one, and I will have to think about it. I really didn't answer your question. Do you have a different one?"

Grateful at the offer she asked, "Harry, was Sirius Black killed during the break-in at the ministry, and who killed him?"

Harry was expecting this question and had thought about an answer. He replied, "Sirius Black was my Godfather. He was an innocent man who was framed by Peter Pettigrew who is still alive and running around as a rat animagus. Sirius was murdered that night by Bellatrix Lestranger."

There was a fair amount of murmuring at these last words, but no one directly challenged his reply.

Finally a man with fly-away brown hair stood and said, "Hello Harry. I'm Odd Lovegood owner of *The Quibbler*. What is your reaction to Minister Scrimgeour replacing Fudge?"

Harry replied, "Minister Fudge and his Undersecretaries gave Voldemort an entire year to regroup without any interruption. I named all of the Death Eaters that I saw the night that he got his body back and he called professor Dumbledore and me crackpots and delusional liars. We didn't lie, and a bunch of them got arrested a few weeks ago. There are still loads of them out there. Minister Scrimgeour seems to be doing things to make the wizarding world safer, but people need to be responsible and do what they can, too."

Most of the people in the audience stood and applauded his words. It was an opportunity to show their incredible frustration at Fudge and show support for Scrimgeour.

Scrimgeour walked over and held out his hand. Harry shook it and a camera flash went off. Scrimgeour said, "That was a good message, Mr. Potter. That ends the questions and also ends the meeting. Thank you all for coming today."

... -- ...

As Harry was getting ready to leave, he noticed Ernie Prang and Stan Shunpike standing off to the side. He walked over to them to say 'hi,' but somehow Ernie saw him first and said, "We wanted to thank you Mr. Potter. Stan was released last night. You're a good lad."

Harry replied, "I'm glad that things worked out, Mr. Prang. Stan, it's good to see you again."

Stan replied, "You're right Ern, he *does* remember me. Pumping Harry's hand, he said "Thank you, Mr. Potter. Thank you *very* much. You call for us anytime you need a lift. Okay?"

"Okay, Stan. Thanks." He looked at Susan, who winked at him and smiled.

... -- ...

Minerva looked into the owlery to find it was still empty. No one had been able to send or receive a message for a few days. She hoped that the bot charm would work. The Old Crow had asked her to look at the report from his fellow scribe, Jbern entitled, *To fight the coming darkness*. It sounded like a timely report, but not owning her own phoenix, she realized that she would have to be patient until the school owls returned.

Chapter Twelve – Heads will Roll

Saturday 27 July

... -- ...

Connie and Anna accompanied Sunset to Umbridge's office. Sunset unsealed the door while Anna prepared her logbook. Anna waited patiently while Connie photographed the office from several angles. When she was through, Anna methodically searched the desk drawers finding nothing of particular interest. After a half hour, Anna had finished and began looking through the office closet, again finding nothing of specific interest. They were looking for documentation regarding Umbridge calling the dementors to Privet Drive last July, or a blood quill that was allegedly used inappropriately.

After a few more minutes, they gave up on the closet. Anna started on the file cabinet and Hammer said, "Anna, you're wasting your time. Everything will be in the briefcase on the floor under that stack of magazines."

Daily replied, "You can't be right every time. She might have tucked a file in here someplace."

"Five galleons?"

"What, is your new gold burning a hole in your pocket? I'll bet you a coffee instead."

"Ha ha. It was good of Minister Scrimgeour to do that for us. Fudge probably would have just pocketed the gold." Hammer doubted that Fudge would have even come by to say thanks. Scrimgeour was looked on by the rank and file as standing behind them and supporting them. Of course she admitted that she now had fifty thousand reasons to think that way.

"No kidding. All right, there's nothing in here. Take another photo of the briefcase and I'll look through it."

Five minutes later Anna said, "Here it is. After his appearance today with all those reporters, if that's Potter's blood on that horrible thing, she a dead woman walking."

Hammer nodded and replied, "I'll have two sugars with mine, thank you." She took two photos of the blood quill before placing in an evidence bag, sealing and signing it.

... -- ...

An hour later, Hammer and Daily had completed their paperwork and Daily took the sealed plastic bags down to the crime lab to test the blood sample that they had taken from Potter against what they had found on the blood quill found in Umbridge's office. If they had a match, the evidence would be damning even without Potter having to resort to a pensieve memory.

When they got down to the evidence room, the lab attendant asked, "Who was murdered with the quill that you gave me last week?"

Surprised at the question, Anna asked, "What do you mean?"

The toxin in that quill was really nasty stuff. I'd never seen it before. It slowly degrades vascular tissue. Most likely, the victim would have an aneurysm within a few days or two weeks at most. Other than bloodshot eyes, they might not notice anything until they drop dead. The reason I ask is there was a tiny trace of blood on the tip of the quill. The victim might not have even noticed that they'd been struck. Where did you find it?"

Anna replied, "Snape had it in his hand, but as far as I know he never regained consciousness after he crashed through the window of Ollivander's trying to escape after Mr. Potter and Director Bones' niece broke up an abduction."

"Maybe the blood was Snape's."

"It could be. I'll contact Potter and Susan just in case."

The lab attendant shivered and said, "Gruesome stuff you two get into out in the field. We don't have an antidote for it, nor do we have a

large enough sample to reliably re-create it. To be honest, it was luck that we ran the right tests with the small sample that we had. When do you need the sample-match test results from the blood quill?"

Hammer replied, "Tomorrow will be great. It won't affect the indictment."

... -- ...

As Hammer and Daily were finishing their paperwork, Harry and Susan were finishing their lunch. They had gone to one of Susan's favorite pubs, The White Horse, and been tucked into a rather dark, corner table, much to their mutual satisfaction. Susan was teasing Harry's leg with her toe, to *his* delight. She said, "You did really well with all of those questions today. That nasty witch from *Teen Witch Weekly* was so nosey."

She looked thoughtful for a moment, thinking about his answer, or lack of, to the interviewer's question. Harry noticed it, and asked, "I hope I answered or didn't answer her question, okay. I didn't want to put you in any more danger or set you up for problems."

She replied, "That's really sweet of you Harry. I heard that Hermione got dozens of howlers in our fourth year, but I'm okay if you want to tell people that we're dating, or if you don't."

He smiled, and stated, "We *are* dating, aren't we? Was I supposed to ask you if..."

She squeezed his hand and said, "Harry, "I'm *very* happy to be your girlfriend. I'm happy to have you be my boyfriend. Of course, that means no more gawking at Hannah's bits."

"I, um, ...didn't mean... okay."

"I'm just teasing, Harry. She *is* beautiful. Maybe we can go for a swim later."

Harry replied, "I'd like that." He murmured, "I think *you're* beautiful."

Susan heard his barely whispered words and felt a tingle run through her. She didn't know if was his magic or just a magical, teen moment, but she would always remember it.

... -- ...

While Harry was staring into Susan's eyes, Narcissa was ushered into Scrimgeour's office. She had been at the award ceremony earlier that day and noticed his words or lack of them regarding Draco. She assumed that his carefully worded statement was his signal that he would be willing to entertain an offer of pardon for her son.

She had been able to secure a two million-galleon loan against the Malfoy manor using a line of credit that Lucius had set up years earlier. Additionally, she liquidated the last of the family held securities for an additional eight hundred thousand and sold her seat on the Wizengamot for another half-million. She hadn't seen the specific charges that Draco would be brought up on, but hoped that she might be able to obtain his freedom.

She displayed considerably less arrogance this time as the receptionist held the door for her. A week ago, she had another sixteen million Galleons in the family vault and a powerful husband. She had examined the photos and read the published reports of his death and was disappointed that Lucius had chosen to pick a fight with an obviously prepared group of Aurors. She hoped that Draco wouldn't be so foolish.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Malfoy. How can I help you?" asked Scrimgeour. He had one hand on top of his desk, the other underneath it, on the trigger of a sawed off double-barrel shotgun held in place by wires to be pointed at the guest chair.

"To come to the point, Minister, the Malfoy family has 2.8 million galleons left. Is that enough to secure Draco's release?"

"He will be tried and most likely convicted of several crimes, Mrs. Malfoy. The most serious is casting an unforgiveable on an innocent; for which there are at least two reliable witnesses. If tried, he will be convicted and sentenced to life in prison. Then there is the attempted abduction; for which there are again at least two witnesses and ample

physical evidence that will run another five years at an absolute minimum. That is a lot of mayhem for 2.8, though I would consent to writing him a pardon for those crimes for three million. Perhaps you will need to shake his piggy bank a little harder. His trial starts in a week. You have until the end of the month, next Wednesday to deliver the gold. Hopefully he won't try to escape, although it has happened before."

There was no hint of exaggeration or bluff in his voice. In truth, he would just as soon see the young troublemaker float through the veil, and didn't have a pressing need for the gold, though further disarming the Malfoys would be a good thing.

Before he could change his mind, Narcissa replied, "I will have your gold for you on Tuesday, Minister. Please have Draco ready for me to pick up on Wednesday at noon. Since he is a minor, I will insist on signing for him myself."

Scrimgeour replied, "As you wish, Mrs. Malfoy." As she was leaving, he called his assistant in and said, "Locate Hammer and send her in."

... -- ...

Amelia welcomed Professor Dumbledore into their home on Monday morning. He said, "Good morning, Amelia. It is good to see you up and about again. May I speak with Harry, please?"

She was a bit surprised. It was the first time that she could remember Dumbledore coming to her home and not having business with her. She smiled at the change and replied, "He's out back with Michelle. You should take a look at this."

He followed her to the kitchen window where Harry and Michelle were working with the pop up target simulator. At ten second intervals, Harry was hitting two targets at once.

"Remarkable," noted Dumbledore. "I cannot perform such a feat myself, let alone with the ease that he is demonstrating. When did this skill manifest itself?"

"I saw it for the first time a few days ago," replied Amelia.

“Who knows of this?” inquired Dumbledore.

“Harry, Michelle, probably Susan, and us.”

“We would do well not to advertise such a rare skill,” remarked the old professor. “I have only seen this performed one other time.”

Amelia replied, “I’ve had that conversation with Michelle and I will be certain to say the same to Susan. I’ll get him for you, Professor.” She didn’t think he looked like he was feeling well, but chose not to say anything.

Harry walked inside looking tired. He said, “Hello Professor. How can I help you?”

Dumbledore smiled, and replied, “Good morning, Harry. I came to invite you to consider assuming your family’s rightful position within the Wizengamot.”

“Professor, what do they do? I only know about the trials that I’ve seen in your pensieve and my own last summer. Who has the Potter seat right now? Would it be all right if Amelia joined us?”

Dumbledore smiled and said, “It is always a good idea to seek qualified advice, and she is as qualified as anyone. Go get her. I’ll wait.”

A moment later, Amelia came in and sat with the other two. Harry said, “Professor Dumbledore has invited me to take the Potter seat back at the Wizengamot. I asked if you could join us. Professor, what do they do?”

“Harry the Wizengamot is made up of the fifty most prominent families within the British Wizarding world. It serves four functions. First, it is the body that elects a new Minister of Magic. Second, the Director of the Magical Law Enforcement position that Amelia holds reports to both Wizengamot but is funded by the Minister, effectively creating a dual reporting situation. Third, it is the lawmaking branch of the wizarding world and finally, it serves as the jury pool for criminal cases.”

Harry remarked, "It sounds like a lot of work."

Dumbledore replied, "It is indeed a lot of responsibility. However, it is not a time consuming position, averaging no more than one afternoon and one evening per week."

Harry inquired, "Who currently is acting in the Potter position?"

Dumbledore replied, "Amos Diggory has been acting as the steward in the position for the last six years. I am sorry to say that Cornelius Fudge was acting as steward from the time of your parents' deaths until he was elected Minister of Magic early in 1990."

Harry asked, "Amelia, what do you think?"

She considered his question for a moment and replied, "Harry the seat is rightfully yours. Professor Dumbledore is right; it is not a time consuming position. Remember when we spoke of influence and authority last week? This is an opportunity to exercise some of each. With respect to the judicial portion, most trials are held with a randomly drawn five-member panel. Only at the request of the head of the Wizengamot, in this case Professor Dumbledore, does the full body hear a case."

Harry considered what he'd heard for a moment. He knew if the professor had thought it a horrible idea that he would have voiced his opinion. Harry glanced at Amelia for a moment and she gave a slight nod. A moment later, he said, "Okay. What do I have to do?"

Dumbledore replied, "Excellent. You will be sworn in tomorrow afternoon. In the event that you are a witness or directly related to a defendant, you will not serve as juror for that case. As such you will not be seated for the Draco Malfoy and Delores Umbridge trials, or the trial for the nine Death Eaters all scheduled for next week."

... -- ...

Tuesday morning at eleven, Narcissa walked into Scrimgeour's office and took the three shrunken chests out of her purse. Like before she whispered a complex incantation and within a minute the chests had expanded to their original size and weight. As soon as she was done,

a Gringotts Goblin came in, and carefully examined each chest. He found them to be untampered with and accurate. Scrimgeour nodded and the Goblin left. A moment later, he said, "This will do. Be back tomorrow at noon."

... -- ...

"Destination, determination... That's stupid," said Michelle looking at the Ministry manual. "Susan and Harry, when you need to apparate, decide where, and do it. The 'decide where' part means to picture *clearly* in your mind where you want to be. Obviously that's easiest if you can see the spot and almost as easy if you can picture the spot in your mind because you've been there before. I'll take you with me a few times so you get used to the feeling of apparating. Who wants to go first?"

Harry answered, "Ladies first. I'll walk over to the other side of the pool and watch."

Susan walked over to Michelle and they held each other's arms. Susan whispered something in Michele's ear and she nodded. A moment later there was a POP and both women were right behind Harry. Susan leaned up and kissed Harry on the back of the neck and said, "Pretty good."

Harry replied, "Brilliant, and the apparating was good too." He smiled at her and suggested, "Try again."

Michelle smiled and replied, "Quite the little taskmaster there, Mr. Potter." A second later there was a slightly smaller Pop and they were back where they had started.

Harry was about to say something and Michelle disappeared and with a much smaller pop was right next to him. She held his arm and announced, "Your turn Mr. Potter. Picture us both right behind Susan facing her." A moment later after a squeezing feeling, they were there.

"Good. Try again."

... -- ...

Wednesday at noon, Narcissa entered Scrimgeour's office. She asked, "Where is my son?"

Scrimgeour replied, "We just finished the paperwork. Straighthand, take Wood with you and bring Draco Malfoy up here for me."

Scrimgeour's assistant asked, "Would you like some tea, Mrs. Malfoy?"

She replied, "No thank you, I would like to review the pardon documents while I'm waiting."

Scrimgeour handed her the document. It read much like a personal promissory note.

In exchange for the sum of three million galleons, I Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister of magic do hereby fully Pardon Draco Malfoy for the following crimes committed on 25 July at 37 Diagon alley.

One - Attempted abduction of Mr. Ramone Ollivander, proprietor.

Two - Casting of the unforgiveable curse, Cruciatus against an innocent on Mr. Ramone Ollivander and holding it for a period of sixty three seconds.

Three – Any incidental property damage done at the Ollivander's wandmaking shop, 37 Diagon Alley.

There was also a property release form listing thirteen galleons, a pocket knife and a wand.

Straighthand brought Malfoy up a few minutes later. His normally slicked-back hair look disheveled and there was blood on his robes from having fallen on his nose at Ollivander's. Scrimgeour said, "Sign here and here, boy, and don't find yourself in my office again."

"It may not be your office for long," drawled Draco; his voice dripping with its usual arrogance and implied threat. "My *father* will hear..."

"Your *father* was carried out of here in a body bag, you insolent twit," replied Straighthand. "I zippered it shut myself."

“Draco,” warned Narcissa, “Keep your mouth shut and wait outside by the fountain. Stay out of trouble. Here, take your things and go.”

“I’ll have your copies ready in just a minute,” said the assistant.

... -- ...

Michelle was pleased at Potter’s progress at simultaneous casting. He could cast an offensive spell at the same time that he cast a defensive spell which would be an almost unbeatable skill in a fight.

She had him practice a simultaneous cutting hex at the same time that he summoned his target’s wand. Neither spell was particularly difficult, but in combination would distract the opponent to the point where the offensive spell wouldn’t be blocked.

“The thing to remember is to say, *Accio wands*,” reminded Michelle. “They might have several and they might have other weapons too. Be sure that they’re stunned, and then bind em.”

Harry nodded in understanding and replied, “Thanks for the advice.”

“You’re making good progress, Mr. Potter. Have a butterbeer and I’ll go find Susan. See you tomorrow.”

... -- ...

Malfoy stepped out into the atrium. It was almost empty except for a few people sitting by the fountain. Draco recognized his cousin Tonks sitting there eating a sandwich. She said, “Hello Draco. I heard you were getting out today. This is my friend, Auror Michael Wood.”

“I don’t have to talk with you,” drawled Draco fingering his wand.

“True,” replied, Wood, “but since I asked, you *do* have to roll up your sleeve. It *is* a crime to be a marked Death Eater. Were you pardoned for *that* too?”

With remarkable swiftness, Draco fired a strong *Reducto* blast at Wood who flew several feet back. Tonks commanded, “Stop Draco! You are under arrest.”

Malfoy wasn't going back to the cells. He apparated back to Malfoy manner.

"Michael!" screamed Tonks. "Somebody call a Mediwitch."

She ran up to him and tripped on something, falling to the floor.

... -- ...

"Try casting a different spell," suggested Michelle.

Harry obliged her by casting his Patronus. His happy memory had changed of late. He thought of Susan kissing him and called, "*Expecto Patronum.*"

Michelle watched in wonder as two brilliant stags flew from his wands. She noticed that the one from his new wand was at least twice as bright as the one from the old wand. In awe of them she exclaimed, "Harry, they're beautiful."

Looking out from the kitchen window, Susan and Amelia thought the same thing.

... -- ...

Back at the atrium, Wood felt like he had been hit by the Knight Bus, but was thankful that he and all of the other aurors had been issued the latest in dragonhide body armor, courtesy of the Malfoy fortune. At ten thousand galleons a set, they were far too expensive for individuals to have to buy themselves, but the department had bought sixty sets in the last few days! He sat up, looked over at Tonks sprawled on the floor and began a pained laugh.

"Grab the perpetrator, Tonks. I'll be all right."

"He got away," groused Tonks, all traces of dignity gone. She was still spread eagle on the floor

"No. He's having a good look at your knickers right now."

She turned around and there was Draco's head on the floor, eyes blinking, apparently the result of a horrible splinching. Narcissa who had seen, but not heard the short confrontation said, "I'll go get the rest of him and bring his body back. You can have him. He's a stupid, stupid boy. He's just like his father." Disgusted at his actions, she walked to the exit point and apparated to the overly leveraged manor. After returning Draco's body to the accidental magical reversal squad and the aurors, she went back to Malfoy Manor, collected her valuables and remaining gold, and left the country to start a new life in Italy.

... -- ...

An hour later, Michael Wood, Tonks, Hammer and Daily were in Scrimgeour's office presenting their report. Daily and Hammer had been stationed as backup and were witnesses. Daily had taken a few photos and written up a report.

Scrimgeour asked Michael, "How do you feel, Wood?"

The fortunate Auror answered, "I'm fine, Sir. I'm lucky to be alive and grateful for the new body armor. The biggest bruise that I have is to my pride, Sir."

"That will heal, Son." He handed Tonks and Wood Gringotts Drafts for fifty thousand galleons each and said, "If the four of you have your paperwork done, take the rest of the day off. Tonks, next time you feel the need to kick a splinched Death Eater's head around, aim for the fountain and walk away. Good work, you four. Dismissed."

"The first round's on me," said Michael.

"All the rounds are on you, Lucky" replied Hammer. "I've seen teenagers who draw faster than you. You can tell us what your sister Michelle has been up to when we get to the pub. Let's go."

... -- ...

As Hammer and the other aurors were hoisting a few pints at the expense of Michael Wood, Harry was confirmed as the newest member of the Wizengamot. In his introductory speech, Professor

Dumbledore noted that Harry was the most influential wizard of his generation within the wizarding world and had an unwavering sense of right and wrong.

As was tradition with every change of membership, a group photo of the entire Wizengamot was taken and copies were given to each of the members. It would be the last photo ever taken of Professor Dumbledore.

... -- ...

You must be kidding Mr. Crow! You can't *possibly* be thinking of leaving the story like that. Where is the rest? I'll admit, it was not my place to criticize Miss Abbott's attire, or Dr. Granger's choice of venue for a family location, but your comment regarding Albus leaves *too* much to the imagination. Fifteen feet of parchment is due within three days. Three days mind you, and no more excuses about defective bot charms."

As he was leaving, in her sternest voice she said, "Remember, I have a birthday party to attend. She shook her walking stick at him." He was too busy reading a new parchment written by the scribe, Japanese Jew to hear a word that she'd said. Besides, he was wondering if white would be an appealing color for a strawberry blonde.

... -- ...

Chapter Thirteen – Return to Folkestone

Wednesday 31 July

Wednesday morning at five, Susan showered and got dressed. She opened the door to Harry's room and saw him sleeping fitfully. Hoping to calm his bad dreams, she walked over to Harry and kissed him on the forehead. Instantly, whatever bad dream that he'd been having stopped and his eyes fluttered open. She kissed him again and said, "Wake up, birthday boy. We're going up to Long Mountain to watch the sun rise."

Ten minutes later they were back up at their spot. Susan had left a note and Harry had showered. The scenery was beautiful as the sky turned from gray to pink to orange to blue. Susan sat in front of Harry and he had his arms covered around her. Remembering her talk with Hannah, she pulled his quidditch jersey that she was wearing up a bit so that his hands, which were wrapped around her stomach, were now wrapped around her smooth skin. She snuggled back into him and said, "That feels nice."

A minute later she nudged his arms upward and purred, "That's better."

Harry gulped, and asked, "Are you sure?"

She wiggled back into him and placed her hands on top of his and declared, "*This* is a nice way to start a day. I like this, Harry."

Too soon, it was time to go back to their house to get breakfast. Each of them knew that they had a new Patronus memory to work with.

... -- ...

While Susan was trying to get Harry to unwrap her first birthday present, Hermione was just starting to read three and a half weeks of the *Daily Prophet*. She had returned home with her parents the night before and had found the invitation to Hannah's party for Harry. She had been surprised to see it, not believing that Hannah had known Harry well enough to go to a party for Harry, let alone host one for

him. She wondered why it wasn't being held at the Weasleys or Grimmauld place. Then she started looking through the headlines.

Boy-Who-Lived and MLE Director Amelia Bones Killed in Separate Attacks

Harry Potter (Chosen One) Kills Two Death Eaters - Saves MLE Director Amelia Bones

Lucius Malfoy Pardoned, Then Killed Attempting to Murder Aurors

Harry Potter and Another Student Foil Ollivander Abduction – Snape's a (Dead) Death Eater. Draco Malfoy is Arrested

Harry Potter and Four Others Receive Bounty Rewards from Ministry

Harry Potter Assumes Family Seat in Wizengamot

She put the papers down; shocked at what she'd just read and told her parents that they'd be going for a drive to Folkestone for the day.

... -- ...

Smidgen had made breakfast by the time that Susan and Harry returned. Amelia was just getting up. She got to the table, and gave him a birthday hug then said, "Happy birthday, Harry. Did you sleep all right?"

Harry replied, "My scar hurt off and on throughout the night. He was happy about something."

Concerned, she asked, "Does it hurt now?"

He answered, "No. Susan came in and kissed it and the pain went away."

"Maybe it gave *him* a headache," replied Susan. "I need to get to Hannah's about eight. Harry, you should come about nine. Auntie, what time can you come?"

She answered, "I'll do my firecalls and come with Harry. I'll test my Apparition skills tomorrow."

Harry asked, "Can Michelle come too? Otherwise, she'd be stuck here all day."

Amelia replied, "That's very thoughtful of you to think of her, Harry. Most people wouldn't give a protection detail a second thought. I'll ask her." She frowned as she thought of all of the times that little Harry must have been left home alone.

... -- ...

At nine, Freedom fireflashed Harry and Amelia to the back yard at the Abbotts. Becky saw them and said, "Happy birthday, Harry. Good morning, Amelia. You're looking like you feel better."

She answered, "I feel much better, thank you. I'm told that I can return to work tomorrow."

Becky replied, "Based on what I've read in the *Daily Prophet* lately, you'll be quite busy."

She observed, "There are a number of trials to proceed over."

Becky smiled and commented, "Let's hope there are more. Harry, this is my husband, Ben. Ben, this is Harry Potter."

Ben shook Harry's hand and replied, "I'm pleased to meet you, Harry. Becky and Hannah have said nothing but nice things about you and I wanted to thank you for saving Hannah's life. I also want to be among the first to welcome you to the Wizengamot."

Harry replied, "Thank you, Sir. I'll do my best."

Becky said, "The girls are out back, Harry. You should go outside and say hi."

Harry went outside and found the two witches walking together by the surf line. They both were wearing matching bikinis with little white bandeau tops and cobolt blue boy-short bottoms. Hannah walked a step over to Harry and gave him a kiss in the cheek and announced, "Hello, birthday boy."

Harry replied "Hi, Hannah. Matching suits? Very nice."

Susan said, "We went shopping for them yesterday. Do you like them?"

Harry replied, "They're great. They look nice... You look nice... Oh, Hell. Good morning." In truth, they both looked fabulous. Toned from the hours of training that she'd done with the hit witch, Susan looked fantastic.

They laughed and each gave him a hug. Hannah said, "Help us put these butterbeers and cokes in the ice cooler. We'll put it under the umbrella over there. We'll have volleyball over there and later we'll have a bonfire back by the rocks."

"Who did you invite?" asked Harry.

"Loads of people," said Hannah. "The Queen should be here at one." They started laughing.

Susan answered, "Our friends, a few of the teachers, most of the DA group, a few of Auntie's friends from work and Ron and Hermione's parents."

Hannah said, "No Death Eaters Harry; you'll have to find something else to do with your wand." She and Susan began giggling uncontrollably as Harry turned beet red. Hannah said, "It looks like you could use some suntan lotion, Harry. Susan, you should help him out."

Always willing to lend a hand, Susan said, "Slip off your shirt, Harry. I'll put some on you real quick."

"Okay," replied Harry. "But I'll want to return the favor."

... -- ...

Professor Dumbledore and another wizard were there first. They found Harry and the girls. The two wizards looked like complete opposites. Tall and thin, Dumbledore had worn tropical weight khaki trousers, a Panama hat, sunglasses and a tan and blue Hawaiian

shirt. His long beard gleamed in the bright sunlight. The other man was five feet high, almost as wide and wore a purple velvet suit with a vest. He had thick white hair and wore a red parsons hat, giving him the overall appearance of an enormous plum topped with whip cream and a cherry.

Harry greeted them saying, "Hello Professor, hello Sir."

"Good morning, Harry and I would like to say, happy birthday. Good morning, Miss Bones, and to you, Miss Abbott. I would like to introduce Professor Horace Slughorn. He will resume teaching potions this term."

Hannah said, "Good morning, Professor. Thanks for coming. Harry speaks of you a lot. Professor Slughorn, my mum took potions classes from you. She said that you're an excellent instructor."

"Did she?" In truth, Slughorn had absolutely no recognition of the person Hannah was referring to.

"Becky McDonald, class of 77," coached Dumbledore.

"Ah yes," recalled Slughorn. "She would have been in Lily Evans' year. And you must be Amelia Bones' Niece. Splendid woman. It must have been a dreadful experience. I read about it in the paper."

Dumbledore said, "Excuse me for a few minutes, Horace. Harry, I was hoping that we might have a word. They sat on two chairs under one of the big umbrellas and Harry handed Dumbledore a bottle of butterbeer.

Dumbledore took it and said, "Thank you, Harry. This is a splendid view. I find the sound of the surf to be a calming experience, like the Earth's own heartbeat. Thank you for inviting Minerva, the others and myself today. Poppy and Minerva could talk of nothing else since they received their letters."

"Susan, Hannah and her mum planned the whole thing, Professor. I hadn't paid much thought to the day, until I got up this morning."

Dumbledore knew that birthdays at the Dursleys wouldn't have been great, but wanted to talk about something else. He said, "When you come back to the castle, I would like you to consider a modified curriculum consisting of transfiguration, charms, estate management and a number of other individual lessons. I regret to say that your schedule might not leave you adequate time to resume your role on the quidditch team, but the special lessons would be of significant benefit to you."

Harry was slightly disappointed at the last part, but not really surprised. He asked, "What would I be learning, Sir?"

Dumbledore replied, "I have compiled a rather large collection of advanced spells and techniques which you might find useful in the fight against Tom. As they really don't lend themselves to a textbook and you seem to learn best by seeing and doing, I have taken the liberty of depositing memories of them into a collection of individual crystal vials. They are in a large wooden box next to my other penseive that I am giving to you as a birthday gift. I ask only that you keep them safe and out of inappropriate hands."

Harry vowed, "I will, Professor."

Dumbledore replied, "I know that you will, Harry. I can't stay, as I promised the others that I would remain in the castle, but I wanted to tell you that I'm proud of the man that you have become, Harry. As a person and as a friend, you have my deepest respect and love."

Harry replied, "Thank you, Professor, and I wanted to apologize again for trashing your office that night. It didn't accomplish anything and I'm sorry."

Dumbledore laughed, and replied, "Harry, there is nothing to forgive. In truth, you needed to say what you did and I needed to hear it. Of course, you were right about Severus. My continued trust in him was badly misplaced and for the damage that I caused, I apologize. Let us look to the future. I am delighted at the prospect of tutoring such a remarkable student as yourself and hope to learn a few things myself in the process. On those lines, I have made other living arrangements for you, as many of the materials that you will be studying would not be appropriate for the Gryffindor common room. To accommodate

that, I asked Filius to sponsor you as the club leader of the practical defense club, really a continuation of the club that you so ably ran last year. He will come and visit with you later next week to discuss the arrangements if you are willing?"

"Of course professor. I... thank you. I wasn't certain how learning even more about goblin rebellions was going to help me."

Dumbledore gave a laugh and said, "Splendid. With your permission, I will come by tomorrow evening and continue our discussion?"

"Thank you, Professor."

"My pleasure Harry. Please enjoy your day, and continue taking care of those around you."

"I will, Professor. Bye."

... -- ...

After Dumbledore left and Slughorn went on to bother someone else, Hermione came up to Harry and introduced him to her parents. "Hello Sir," greeted Harry. "I'm pleased to meet you, the same for you, Ma'am."

"Hi Harry. I'm Dan. This is Emma. We've heard a lot about you in the last few years."

Harry wasn't sure what to say, and replied, "Hermione's been a great friend since we were eleven."

Emma commented, "We were sorry to hear about the loss of your aunt and uncle."

Harry replied, "Thanks. I'm really in a much better place now. Susan's aunt took me in and I feel like I'm part of a family now."

Hermione asked, "Where are you living now?"

Harry replied, "Welshpool about a mile away from Long Mountain. It's a nice home and I'm really happy. Susan and I are dating, and we're

good for each other.” Becky called Hermione’s parents over and they excused themselves leaving Harry and Hermione alone.

Even though she wasn’t intentionally eavesdropping, Susan overheard Harry talking and her heart swelled with happiness. A moment later her eyes welled with tears. She realized what her feelings were for Harry and she had to go tell Hannah.

Hermione said, “I’m happy for you Harry.”

There was something in Hermione’s voice that Harry couldn’t pick out, but he took her words at face value and replied, “Thanks. How was your holiday in Serbia?”

“Dreadful! I don’t know what dad and mum were thinking. Usually we go on some recreational trip like skiing or to a resort that has a golf course, but this was horrible. Dad claimed that it was to be an ‘educational experience.’ They could have gotten us killed a dozen times. Speaking of which, can we visit sometime in the next few days? I’d like to catch up properly, but this isn’t the right spot.”

Harry replied, “Susan and I will pick you up tomorrow at eight. Bring a swimsuit and some workout gear.”

“Harry, Folkstone is pretty far from Crawley. My parents house isn’t connected to the floo network.”

He replied, “Just be ready.”

... -- ...

Hannah and Neville came by a minute later. Harry saw him and at the same time, they said, “Happy birthday.” Harry noticed that they were holding hands and stammered, “I... Congratulations. Embarrassed to ask, Harry inquired, “Have you been dating long?”

Neville said “About five minutes. So far it’s great. Hannah has come over a time or two to help with my greenhouse, and we just sort of...”

“Brilliant,” declared Harry.

"Excuse me," said Hannah. "I need to help mum for a minute."

Neville and Harry walked over to get another butterbeer and Harry observed, "She seems like a great witch, Neville. Good on you."

Neville replied, "Thanks. She asked me to come over tomorrow to go swimming and hang around the beach."

Harry nodded and replied, "I'd highly recommend it."

... -- ...

Madam Pomfrey and Professors Flitwick and McGonagall came by a few minutes later and found Harry, Becky, Emma and Susan playing four man volleyball with Hermione, Dan, Hannah and Neville. They enjoyed watching them play. A minute later, Ben Abbott rotated in Harry's place and they greeted him.

"Good morning, Harry and happy birthday," said Pomfrey. Seeing that he was tanned and had added size and muscle in the last month she added, "I must say, the summer seems to be agreeing with you."

"Thank you," replied Harry. "It's a lot better at the Bones."

"Harry," greeted Flitwick, "Professor Dumbledore told us that he'd talk with you before we got here. We thought that one of us could spend a few hours each afternoon with you helping you with our particular fields. The times would vary from day to day, but they would either be from one to three or three to five. This would reach far outside the NEWT prep area and would tend to be more practical than theory, but we want to help you as much as we can."

"Did he tell you the prophecy?" asked Harry.

"He told us the first part and said that Tom Riddle would already know that part," replied Flitwick. "He said the remaining was tactical in nature and yours to share as you saw fit."

Harry asked, "Will this be in addition to sixth year charms and transfiguration?"

McGonagall replied, "Heavens no, Harry. By Christmas you would be completely bored with the other classes."

"What will I have in the mornings?"

Poppy replied, "Self study and physical conditioning as I understand it. Albus told us your schedule would be as follows:"

Monday – transfiguration

Tuesday – hit-wizard level defense and healing after dinner

Wednesday – charms and estate management

Thursday – defense and healing after dinner

Friday – defense and field trips

Saturday – Wizengamot in the mornings, free time in the afternoons

Sunday – free time

"Harry, did Dumbledore mention Quidditch?" asked Minerva. She didn't want to be the one to take away the thing that she knew he loved so much.

Harry nodded and replied, "I told him that I really wouldn't have time this year."

"Perhaps you would consider being the announcer," suggested Pomfrey. "You certainly know the game."

"True, but half the fun is watching Professor McGonagall tussle with the announcer," said Harry with a surprisingly straight face. Flitwick chuckled while Poppy bit her lip to avoid laughing at her friend's long running feuds with each and every quidditch announcer.

"It *has* been my lot in life to have a nearly unending string of excessively colorful announcers," admitted Minerva.

"Who picks them?" asked Harry

"I do," admitted Flitwick, who had a twisted smirk on his face. "It does tend to balance things out a bit."

Poppy declared, "You have many other guests to greet, Harry. Thank you again for inviting us."

"Thank you for coming."

... -- ...

Harry went inside for a moment and came out just as the Weasleys arrived. Fortunately they didn't see him and he wasn't mobbed. He found Susan and asked, "Did you know that it's Neville's birthday too?"

She replied, "Of course. Hannah had the whole thing planned out."

"Did we, did you get him something?"

"Naturally. We got him a wrist wand holder just like the one that Mr. Ollivander gave us and also a cute little miniature banana plant." She kissed his cheek and reminded him, "We work as a team. Besides, Hannah's had her eye on him for a while now."

Harry replied, "I think it worked. They were holding hands a minute ago."

... -- ...

While Harry and Susan were inside, Ron was outside waiting his turn to join the volleyball game. Bill and Daily were talking nearby. Bill said, "Congratulations on your bounty money, Anna. I was there when the goblins deposited the gold in your vault."

She said, "Thanks, Bill. I'd never even *seen* fifty thousand Galleons let alone had it. Really it was mostly Mr. Potter's doing, but I'm grateful that he arranged it. My partner, Connie was really surprised too. Tonks was so excited at the award ceremony that her hair stuck straight out, purple. It was a bit shocking to see. Do you know Mr. Potter?"

Bill replied, "Not well. He's a friend of the family. My youngest brother and the twins know him pretty well. He saved my sister Ginny's life when she was eleven."

Anna said, "He saved me a week ago. I nearly stepped onto a Death Eater's portkey at Ollivander's. He stopped me when I was going in to check on that Death Eater that he'd blasted. He stopped three Death Eaters in a week, two of em dead. That makes him a hero in my book."

Ron looked at the beautiful investigator and wondered just what the hell had happened while he'd been gone. He went to talk with Hermione.

... -- ...

Susan and Harry were resting under one of the umbrella tables after lunch when Fred and George sat down beside them. Fred said, "Hiya Harry. Hello Ms Bones. Are the two of you taking a break from saving the world today, or plotting about who to go after next?"

George said, "Seriously, we saw Snape crash through the plate glass at Ollivander's. That was an inspired move. Congratulations, you two."

Harry didn't say anything for a moment, but Susan did. In a low, but crystal clear voice she admonished, "Do the two of you think that is really something that we want to talk about? That greasy arsewipe tried to murder us twice within five seconds. I can't speak for Harry, but I was scared witless."

George replied, "True, but beside rescuing Mr. Ollivander, the two of you *have* saved an *entire generation* of witches and wizards from having to suffer under the wrath of that evil greasy git."

Fred observed, "Think about it Susan. The first years coming to the castle this fall will have a decent chance at not having nightmares."

Harry and Susan smiled at that thought. Susan apologized, "I'm sorry for going off on you two about that. It will just take us some time to get used to it, I suppose. It's been a pretty intense summer."

George replied, "No worries. We were hoping that the next time the two of you had a chance, you would stop out and see our shop. We wouldn't be there except for Harry."

Susan, looked at Harry, realized there was yet another story to be told and said, "We'll stop by sometime next week."

... -- ...

Michelle Wood sat down and declared, "This is a great party Susan. Thank you two for inviting me."

"You're welcome, Michelle. The weather turned out really nice. It would have been a lot harder to have if it had rained."

"Harry, I don't know if you heard, but Narcissa Malfoy bought that nasty brat Draco a partial pardon. He wasn't out a minute and he tried to kill my brother."

"What happened?" gasped Susan. "Is he okay?"

"He's fine," she replied. "Minister Scrimgeour bought all of the aurors Hungarian Horntail body armor. It saved his life."

"That's great," replied Susan.

"I won't keep you. I just wanted to say thanks and happy birthday." She gave them both hugs and walked over to sit by Lee Jordan who was strumming on his guitar, humming different songs.

... -- ...

Bob Sunset came by a minute later. He said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Potter, Miss Bones. I'm Bob Sunset. Happy birthday."

Harry replied, "Thank you. I saw you outside Ollivander's the other day."

Sunset admitted, "I was there, mostly calling for more backup and keeping the gawkers back a bit. Strange thing, no one's seen Ollivander since."

“Maybe he went on holiday for a while,” suggested Susan. “Voldemort had obviously sent those two to abduct him. Why would they stop after one try?”

Harry silently related her words to Crabbe and Goyle attempted murder of Amelia.

... -- ...

Moody and Lupin met Harry right before dinner. Remus observed, “It’s looks like you’ve been having a busy summer, Harry. How are things going, staying with Director Bones and Susan?”

“Great,” replied Harry. “I saw that you were able to sell the house.”

Remus, agreed, “Yes, Dedalus did fetch a greater than promised price for it. Honestly, I’m glad to be rid of it.”

Moody observed, “Good work at Ollivander’s. Constant vigilance.”

Harry nodded and asked, “He didn’t mention where he was going, did he?”

Moody replied, “No, but he must be around somewhere. Thanks for inviting us. It’s good to get out for fun once in a while.”

Remus said, “Happy birthday, Harry. We’d better get our plates and get in line. No testing the food until *after* you have sat down this time, Moody,” admonished Lupin.

... -- ...

As they were finishing dinner, Harry overheard Amos Diggory and Amelia having a discussion. Amos declared, “I’m certain that every side in every conflict in history has believed that they were right. A lot of the conservatives don’t like the changes that they see coming. What gives us the moral high ground?”

“I like to believe it’s largely a matter of methods,” replied Amelia. “The Ministry doesn’t break into people’s homes and businesses and torture them or drag them off.”

“True, but for enough gold, Rufus seems pretty willing to issue get-out-of jail cards.”

“Maybe, but he had to do something. Fudge bankrupted us. We were within a few weeks of withholding paychecks. He had the choice of selling a few pardons or doubling the shop tax and business is already down the way it is. You had your hat in the ring Amos, what would you have done?”

“I wouldn’t be giving it away as bounties and paying better than a half million galleons to buy some armor that can’t even block a killing curse, slurred Diggory”

Amelia replied, “It’s better than eighteen million in found money. She could have used that gold to raise an army against us. You’re potted Amos. Take a portkey home and sleep it off.”

... -- ...

At eight, Ben Abbott lit the bonfire and transfigured thirty matchsticks into stumps and low chairs for people to sit on. Soon people gathered round the fire and began telling stories. Susan told of the time that Snape ‘accidentally’ overheard Michael Corner telling Ginny about one of the broom closets where they would be meeting up in ten minutes.

Harry asked, “What happened?”

Susan replied, “Snape sneaks up to the closet and hears that the two people inside are getting pretty involved.”

Neville inquired, “Then what happened?” Everyone quieted down to hear the story.

Susan continued, “Snape vanished the door apparently expecting someone else, but it turned out that Pansy Parkinson and Draco were in there, more than half undressed. Naturally, he let them go without a word. Draco was in such a hurry to get dressed and leave that he had Pansy’s bra half tucked into the back of his trousers, and for some reason he decided that he needed to go to the library. Madam Pince gave him a weeks detention for disrupting the entire library with

his inappropriate dress.” Everyone laughed; Flitwick the loudest. He had endured years of snide remarks from the blonde, arrogant brat.

Lee began strumming on his guitar again and Fred announced, “George and I have a little ditty for you. It goes like this.”

There was a git named Severus Snape

He was a greasy scum

He’s been the ruin of many a poor boy

And Neville, he sure was one

As George was singing, Hannah wrapped her arms around Neville from behind and whispered something into his ear. She kissed his neck and gave him a hug.

Now the only thing that the greasy git had

Were grey pants and his hand on his gun

And the only time that he was satisfied

Was when he made the firsties run

Fred did a rude little pantomime and George finished with the last verse. Flitwick fell off his chair he was laughing so hard.

There was a git named Severus Snape

He never was much fun

I know one thing and it is great

His teaching days are done!

There were hoots and clapping from everyone. Lee, Fred and George did a little bow.

“Seriously,” declared Neville, “He was the worst part of school.”

"I don't know," replied Fred.

"There was Umbridge," finished George.

"And Filch," said Hannah.

"And the three-headed dog," added Ron.

"The dog wasn't so bad," replied Harry. "At least it tried to bite Snape's leg off."

"Fluffy wouldn't hurt a fly," protested Hagrid.

"Of course Snape was more like a bat than a fly," replied Lee laughing. "How about when Ron's rat bit Crabbe."

Susan, Harry and a number of the others suddenly grew quiet. Salvaging the mood, Amelia conjured a dozen rat traps and handed them to Harry and Susan. She suggested, "We could set some of these out. We might get lucky."

Harry, smiled and winked at her mouthing, "Thanks."

... -- ...

As Fred and George led the singing of yet another ribald song dishonoring Umbridge, Albus was walking up the stairway to the corridor where his office was. Two steps from the top, the carotid artery in his brain burst. He felt a blinding headache, then lost his balance on the top step, and fell the sixteen steps to the landing below.

By the time that their song was over, the greatest wizard of the twentieth century had passed on to the next great adventure. His last conscious thought was the hope that he had done enough to help Harry fulfill his destiny.

... -- ...

Five hundred miles to the north; the dementors collectively left the posts they had held for some three hundred and ninety years. Only

someone like Professor Binns could recall the origin of their arrangement with the ministry, but like a flock of geese, they drifted away from the island in an unholy formation, two hundred and two in number.

Minutes later, Voldemort and a handful of Death Eaters stormed the island and effectively came up empty handed. Voldemort wanted his Death Eaters back, not a rag-tag army of pickpockets and shoplifters. He gave the inmates the option of leaving the island or joining him. All but a small handful had taken the option to leave the island.

Bellatrix obliged them by banishing them into the North Sea still wearing their anti-apparation bracelets. The prisoners died of hypothermia within a dozen minutes. The four others were portkeyed back to Riddle Manor.

... -- ...

Back at the beach, Harry's scar burst into a wave of pain. He slumped out of his chair clutching his forehead.

Susan saw him and cried, "Oh no."

He crumpled to the floor and began shaking for almost two minutes. A chill passed from Harry's body as she kissed his forehead and helped him back into the chair. Amelia bent over him and in a low voice, asked, "Harry, what's wrong?"

Harry held both hands to his head and pressed his forehead to stop the spinning sensation. He declared, "Riddle's storming Azkaban. The guards are all dead. The dementors quit."

... -- ...

"Mr. Crow," began McGonagall without a hint of a smile on her face. "Just because *she* felt the need to take Albus away from us doesn't mean that you needed to follow suit. Surely you recognize the need..."

He unrolled an old parchment and showed it to her. She picked it up and read, ...*And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have powers that the Dark Lord knows not...*

McGonagall was not impressed. In as angry a voice as the old scribe had ever heard, she exclaimed, "*You must be joking*, Mr. Crow. Is this supposed to mean that Harry can do something that he who-must-not-be-named can not, or that Harry can do something that V, Voldemort doesn't know that Harry can do? What kind of drunken seer dreamed this one up?"

But the old storyteller had already left. She saw another scrap on the floor where she had been standing. It read, Volans - Honks

... -- ...

Chapter Fourteen – Susan & Hermione

With Susan and Amelia's help, Harry was fine again within a few minutes. Susan held a cool cloth on his forehead and rubbed circles between his shoulder blades to reduce his stress. Most of the guests at the party had never seen Harry get one of his visions and were either excessively concerned, or nervous.

Amelia immediately went into the cool command mode that made her the effective leader that she was. She said, "Aurors, Azkaban's been breached. The dementors likely have defected. Connie, get to headquarters. *Do not* send any Aurors there at this time. There are no prisoners held there that are worth anyone else dying over. Be prepared to respond to dementor attacks along the northern coast. Send teams of four if you have to go someplace. Becky and Ben, I hate to break up such a wonderful party, but people probably should be getting home."

So ended the best birthday celebration that Harry had ever had. He thanked everyone for coming and survived crushing hugs from the Weasley women. He reminded the people from the DA to practice their patronus forms if they could. He told Ron that he'd see him in the next few days.

When the Grangers nervously got ready to leave, Harry found Hermione and said, "Susan and I will pick you up tomorrow at eight."

McGonagall and the other professors came to say their goodbyes. Minerva said, "I tried firecalling Albus a minute ago. He must have heard and left already."

Hagrid said, "He probably went t' Elgin and Wick to see if them dementors turned up. Nasty creatures if I say so myself. We'll talk to him tomorrow."

Amelia walked over to Harry, gave him a hug and said, "Thank you for telling us. Your warning about the guards may help save lives tonight. I need to get to the ministry building. Michelle, can I trouble you to make me a portkey to the entrance and then get Susan and Harry home? I'll call you if I'll be late. Please stay inside until it is light out."

Ben conjured big sacks for Harry and Neville to put their unopened birthday gifts into. Harry said, "Mr. and Mrs. Abbott, I had a great day here today. Thank you so much for hosting this and having me."

Becky replied, "You're very welcome Harry. Feel free to stop over anytime." She looked at him for a moment, hugged him and said, "Happy birthday."

Ben shook his hand and said, "You're a good man, Harry. Take care of Susan and Amelia."

Harry replied, "I promise, Sir. Good night." He thought of Freedom and a moment later the little phoenix appeared. Harry asked, "Can you take the three of us and this bag back home?"

The little phoenix hopped onto his shoulder and a moment later they had vanished.

When they appeared in the kitchen a moment later, Michelle remarked, "That was amazing! There was none of the spinning sensation that you would get with a portkey, just a warm breeze."

Susan added, "It is pretty neat."

Michelle hesitated for a moment and asked, "Mr. Potter, what did you see tonight?"

Harry opened bottles of butterbeer for the three of them and began, "I saw the dementors sort of form up into a formation and they just took off and floated away from the island. There were more than I'd ever seen before. Then Riddle and five others arrived by portkey. A half minute later, they had killed the guards and started unlocking the cell doors. Then the vision stopped."

"I kissed you and you stopped shaking," suggested Susan.

Harry looked into her eyes for a moment and replied, "Thanks."

"How many dementors did you see?" asked Michelle.

Harry thought about it for nearly a minute and replied, "More than the first time they attacked me; probably twice as many. I'd say two hundred."

Susan looked at him and asked, "You were attacked by a *hundred* dementors? When?"

"At the end of third year."

Not wanting to stray from the topic, Michelle asked, "Are you certain that they arrived by portkey? They didn't come on some kind of boat?"

"No. It landed them there and glowed blue for a second. It was some kind of chain or cord."

She nodded and replied, "Okay, thanks. I need to leave for just a minute or two. I'll take the floo. Don't let anyone in."

... -- ...

When the Weasleys got back, and Molly and Ginny had gone to bed, Ron asked his dad, "What's been going on the last month?"

Arthur knew that this conversation was coming and sat his youngest son down in the family room. He poured himself a glass of firewhiskey and a smaller one for his son and told him what he'd heard and read.

When he finished, Ron said, "So in the course of two weeks, Harry nearly got blown up in Diagon Alley, and somehow saved Hannah Abbott. A day or so later, his relatives got burned to a crisp. By some miracle, he wasn't there at the time, but was at the Ministry where he saved Susan and Director Bones from two Death Eaters. He killed them in some kind of duel, and somehow got Director Bones to the castle hundreds of miles away and saved her life. A few days later, he and Susan are in Ollivander's where they stopped Snape and Malfoy from kidnapping Mr. Ollivander. Harry captured Malfoy, and Snape got himself killed by one of the aurors. Then he got some kind of huge reward from the Minister. Is that about it?"

Arthur sat for a few seconds and sipped the liquid from his glass. He set it down and answered, "Yes, that's about it. Oh, he took his family seat at the Wizengamot and from what Moody told me, he's dating Susan Bones."

Ron declared, "I used to be jealous of him and his fame. He can have it. He gets into more firefights with Death Eaters than all the Aurors put together."

"Harry has been a good friend to our family, Ron. I'm glad that you're beginning to see your own glass as half full." The thin man stood and patted his youngest boy on the shoulder and said, "Goodnight, Son."

"Goodnight, Dad."

... -- ...

Harry and Susan got up early the next day and were waiting at the table for Amelia to come down. At 6:30 she did, and greeted them. Harry handed her a cup of tea and a glass of pumpkin juice for Susan.

Susan asked, "Auntie, how did it go last night?"

Amelia replied, "Harry's vision was spot on. The portkey that they had used had been stolen from the Auror office yesterday afternoon. Connie and Anna are looking into that. Eight guards and the supervisor had been murdered at Azkaban. There were no sightings in northern Scotland of the dementors, but it would be fairly easy for them to hide in that part of the country."

Smidgen finished the toast and brought them each a plate and a bowl of oatmeal. Amelia asked, "What plans do you two have for the day?"

Susan answered, "Michelle is helping me at seven. We're having Hermione Granger over for the day, and Harry has training later in the morning."

Amelia looked thoughtful for a moment and asked, "How old is she?"

Harry replied, "She's sixteen. Her birthday is 19 September."

Amelia said, "I spoke with her and her parents for a few minutes yesterday afternoon. They seem like nice people." She conjured a form wrote on it a moment and said, "Ask her to have her parents sign it and send it into the Ministry with five galleons. If your plans change, please let me know. Be careful today."

Harry replied, "You too. We'll see you for dinner. Do you want to see if Freedom would take you to the ministry?"

Amelia answered, "I'll be fine. Thanks for offering. If you can wait, we'll go through your birthday gifts after desert."

Susan said, "Bye Auntie. Have a nice day. Love you."

Bones replied, "Bye you two. Love you too." She threw the red powder into her fireplace and a moment later was gone.

... -- ...

An hour later, Minerva and Flitwick sat at the staff table reading the *Daily Prophet*. It seemed like Harry's vision had been right. Azkaban had been emptied and the dementors were missing. Minerva inquired, "I wonder if Albus had found them yet?"

Flitwick replied, "I hope so. He must have been searching for them all night."

Just then, Winky the house elf came to the table. She seemed to be nearly hysterical.

"What is it, Winky?" asked Flitwick, who seemed to get along better with the houselves than his transfiguration colleague.

"Professor Dumbledore," choked the little elf in between sobs.

"He's not here," admonished McGonagall, impatiently.

If possible, Winky started wailing even louder. Finally she blurted, "Professor is dead." She tugged at Flitwick's arm and said, "Winky's show you."

... -- ...

Meanwhile Harry and Susan had arrived in the back yard at the Grangers. Hermione was sitting out at their round garden table with an umbrella, reading a book. Not hearing the Knight Bus, she looked up and was startled to see them. She said, "Hi Harry, good morning Susan." She saw the little red and yellow bird and asked, "Harry, is that a phoenix?"

The little phoenix hopped onto Harry's forearm and he nodded saying, "Freedom, this is my friend, Hermione. Hermione, this is Freedom."

Hermione looked at the golden and scarlet bird and replied, "She's beautiful. May I touch her?"

Harry answered, "That would be up to her, but I think she would let you."

Hermione stroked the bird for a moment and declared, "She's amazing."

Susan watched Hermione talking with Harry for a minute and took the form out of her pocket. She announced, "You should have your mum sign this and send it to the ministry with five galleons. When we get back, maybe Hedwig would fly it in for you."

Hermione looked at it for a minute and her eyes grew wide. She asked, "Are you serious? I'll be right back. She and her mum came back a minute later. Hermione said, "Thank you, mum. Oh, take a look at Harry's phoenix."

Emma was getting ready to go to work, and had her lab coat on. She looked at the little phoenix in wonder and observed, "Remarkable. Will Hermione really be allowed to use magic this summer?"

Harry answered, "As soon as the form gets stamped."

Hermione handed Harry two notes and said, "I don't have any galleons. Harry, can I exchange some with you?" There was a pleading look in her brown eyes.

Harry dug into his pocket and pulled out a handful of the golden coins, smiled and replied, "Here's ten. We can settle up later."

Hermione was practically hopping on one foot. She asked, "Could we possibly stop at the ministry first?"

Susan shook her head and declared, "We told Auntie that we would come straight home."

Harry felt his bushy haired friend's impatience and thought about what he was asking for a moment. Freedom hopped on Hermione's shoulder and a moment later she had vanished in a flash of flame.

"What happened?" questioned Emma, amazed at what she'd just seen.

"She'll be back in a minute or two. Phoenixes can transport people that way. You can go miles in just a second. She's at the ministry in London by now." Susan looked slightly annoyed.

Emma Granger had an inkling of what was happening and attempted to diffuse it. "You and Hannah arranged a lovely gathering yesterday for Harry and Neville, Susan. Everyone that I talked with was happy that you invited them. Thanks again for including us. They're lucky guys to have such considerate girlfriends."

Whatever was bothering Susan passed and she smiled and replied, "Thank you, Dr. Granger. It was fun to see everyone and meet some new people. Did you get to meet Hagrid?"

"My, yes! He told me about raising unicorns and some sort of half horse half eagle creature that can really fly."

Harry smiled and said, "They would be Hippogriffs. Hermione and I rescued my Godfather, Sirius, on one. It was so cool." He found that he was starting to be able to talk about good times with Sirius and not feel so bad.

Susan knew that he was getting over his grief and she said, "Harry does have a knack for having interesting adventures with his friends."

Just then Hermione flashed back with Freedom. There was a look of sheer joy on her face. She blurted out, "Oh, thank you, Susan. Please be sure to thank your aunt, never mind, I'll send her a note myself. Harry, your little phoenix is remarkable. She took me right to the proper place in line."

Harry looked at Susan, nodded and she suggested, "Breathe, Hermione. Show your mum a spell or two then we'll get going."

"Oh, good idea," admitted Hermione. She took her wand out pointed it at the big rock in the back garden and said, "*Wingardium Leviosa*." The rock rose a few feet in the air and she moved it around the air a bit and set it back down where it was.

"Outstanding!" said Emma. "Was that hard to do?"

"Heavens, no," answered Hermione. "We learned to do that in the fall of our first year. Watch this." She transfigured the rock into a baby elephant. It looked around for a bit and walked over to them.

"Amazing! Did you learn that when you were in first year too?" asked Emma.

"No," admitted Susan, impressed at what she'd seen. "We haven't had that in class yet."

"I've done a bit of reading ahead," admitted Hermione. She changed the elephant back into the rock and returned it to the proper spot.

"We should go now," announced Harry. "It was nice to see you again, Dr. Granger."

"I'll be home by dinner time," said Hermione. "Have a nice day, Mum. Love you."

"Enjoy your day. It was nice to see you again Susan; you too Harry. Bye." The three of them held hands and freedom hopped on Harry's shoulder. A moment later they were gone.

... -- ...

They reappeared in the back yard at Welshpool a second later. Michelle was sitting at the umbrella table having lemonade. She said, "Hi Mr. Potter, Susan. Hello, I'm Michelle Wood. You must be Hermione Granger. I saw you yesterday, but didn't get a chance to introduce myself. Harry, are you doing your training this morning, or taking the day off?"

Harry replied, "I'd like to do my training. Hermione, it only goes for about an hour."

"We'll do some stretching for a bit, then go for a swim. Don't worry about us," suggested Susan.

As Harry and Michelle went to the other side of the big open area, Hermione asked, "What kind of training does she teach?"

Susan replied, "She's a ministry hit witch that Professor Dumbledore assigned to watch over us for the summer after Auntie was attacked. She's amazing to watch and work with, but I've been sore everyday since she came here. I never did any physical conditioning before this summer. I've been sore in places I didn't even know existed," she admitted.

"You look great though," observed Hermione with a bit of envy in her voice.

"Did you bring an exercise outfit? I'll show you some of the stretches," offered Susan.

"Yes, it's in my sports bag said Hermione. I brought a swimsuit too."

Susan smiled at her and replied, "Okay. Let's go get changed."

... -- ...

Hermione was astounded at the change in Susan over the last month. She was strong and had developed amazing flexibility. Together, they did stretches, sit-ups, leg exercises, and back exercises. Last summer, Hermione swam recreationally, several times a week and thought that she was in better than average condition for a witch, but

she couldn't come near to keeping up with Susan, who seemed driven.

As they were doing their cool downs Hermione asked, "What has Harry been working on?"

Susan answered, "Hitting multiple targets, but I expect that he'll go back to work on his patronus charms after last night. Michelle has him working on strengthening the power that he's been putting into his spells. We'll be ready to take our apparition exams Saturday. He's been busy with his Wizengamot preparation. There're trials Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday next week."

Choosing her words carefully, Hermione asked, "Do you two take any time to just date and visit?"

Susan replied, "Yes, but every time we do something seems to happen. I was ready to snog him silly one morning when we noticed that Auntie had forgotten her lunch. Fifteen seconds later, he'd killed two Death Eaters and saved Auntie. She was hurt pretty badly, but he got her to help in time. A few days later, we had gone out for lunch and stopped in to see Mr. Ollivander and we got attacked again. In between, we try to go up to the top of Long Mountain and watch the sun rise when we can."

Hermione wanted to say something, but a moment later the fireplace lit up. Randi from the ministry called out, "Susan? Harry?"

Susan heard the call and said, "Excuse me, Hermione. There's a firecall. It's Randi."

Hermione replied, "I'll go get Harry. She walked over to the area where Harry and Michelle were working. As soon as Michelle saw Hermione she called "Visitors." She shut down the target trainer and motioned to Harry to turn around.

Harry did, saw her there and asked, "What's up? We were just finishing."

She answered, "There is a firecall for you and Susan. Someone named Randi is calling for you."

Harry said, "She's one of the administrators who works for Susan's aunt. I think she also does work for the Wizengamot." He walked inside and saw that Susan was crying.

Randi asked, "May I come through?"

Harry replied, "Sure. What do I have to do?"

She said, "This is a restricted access fireplace. There should be some white powder on the mantle. Toss a pinch in the fireplace."

Harry did and a moment later she came through.

Harry asked, "What's wrong?"

Randi answered, "I'm sorry to have to say this all at once, but I've got to contact quite a few people quickly. Professor McGonagall called a half-hour ago. Professor Dumbledore was found dead in the castle this morning. The Malfoy trial is being rescheduled for the afternoon of 6 August at 1 p.m. The Umbridge trial is still scheduled for the morning of 6 August at 8 a.m. You are scheduled to be a witness at that hearing." She handed him a piece of parchment that had the different dates and the specific charges for each case.

She said, "There is also a full Wizengamot meeting scheduled for the morning of Monday 5 August at 8 a.m. The purpose will be to appoint an interim head of the body. You should plan on arriving at my office no later than 7:00. Have you been fitted for the official robes yet?"

Harry replied, "No."

Randi replied, "No worries. Have you bought anything from Madam Malkin's lately?"

Harry answered, "Two weeks ago."

Randi smiled, "Good. She'll have your sizes on file. Read your papers over as soon as you can. There's nothing specific to do until Monday. I expect the memorial will be held Monday at 7 p.m. No one from the papers specifically knows where you are, so you shouldn't be hounded for interviews. Please let me know if you would be gone for

any length of time like overnight, so I can reach you in case of an emergency. Do you have any questions?"

Harry asked, "What happened?"

Randi replied, "At this time there is no official word. His body is being examined. Gringotts has been notified, as have the board of governors and the minister. He will make an announcement on the Wizarding wireless at eleven. I'm sorry Mr. Potter, but I must be going. Please contact me if I can be of assistance." She pulled some red floo powder out of her pocket, threw it into the fire and a moment later, she was gone.

They stood there in silence for a minute and unconsciously merged into a group hug.

... -- ...

The old scribe stood in silence at the news. He hadn't agreed with many of the actions that the old professor had taken in regards to Harry, and in fact, had been outwardly critical of the infant's placement and lack of follow-up visits, but he never questioned Dumbledore's intent.

As McGonagall sat weeping at the loss of a colleague, mentor and perhaps more, the old scribe knew that this was not the time to pass on yet another recommendation. He knew that there would be another time and another place.

Chapter Fifteen – The Hit Witch

Thursday 1 August

Ten minutes later, Michelle went inside and found the three of them still in their group hug. They had unconsciously been taking turns crying; it seemed to have been Hermione's turn. In a surprisingly gentle voice she asked, "What happened?"

Susan replied, "Professor Dumbledore... somehow died."

Having just seen the man alive and apparently well, she pressed for facts, not realizing the extent of Harry's relationship with him. "What happened? Was it dementors?"

Susan answered, "All we know is that he was found dead in the castle this morning. Randi told us that Professor McGonagall reported it and that a memorial service was being scheduled for Monday evening."

Mistakenly thinking that they wanted her to say something, she started babbling. "I suppose the school governors will confirm McGonagall to be headmistress. She'll probably put up another position available listing in the paper. The Wizengamot has a few vacancies. Dumbledore's brother might take his family seat or pass. We've no news yet on the other open spots. I expect that Minister Scrimgeour will make an announcement shortly. You might put the wireless on."

... -- ...

Harry felt himself shrink in light of the news. For the last month, he had forced himself to believe that, with the right coaching and tutoring, maybe, just maybe, he stood a chance at facing the Dark Lord, and actually prevailing. Those dreams now seemed dim in light of the reality that the promises that Dumbledore had made the day before all but evaporated in the last hour.

There would be no special lessons from the only other person that Harry had seen or known who had personally faced Riddle and lived to tell the tale. Silently Harry cursed Trelawney for delivering the

prophecy. If she hadn't said it, Riddle would have never learned of it, and just as likely, his parents wouldn't have been killed in 1980. *'Damn her. Damn him. Why did he have to die?'*

... -- ...

Scrimgeour's wireless announcement was factual and exuded optimism. He emphasized the succession plans that were in place. Minerva had automatically been nominated interim headmistress for the coming term. She immediately declined, preferring to remain in her own position and Flitwick was named interim headmaster. The board of school governors would most likely make it a permanent offer during the year. Flitwick was well respected, both as a talented wizard and also as a gifted instructor.

He would have the opportunity to fill two currently vacant positions. Dumbledore had contracted with Slughorn days before his death, leaving him to fill the DADA position and a possible replacement at charms. He would also need to fill heads of house positions for Slytherin and Ravenclaw.

... -- ...

Regardless of the spin that Scrimgeour had placed on things, the glass was *not* half full with respect to the war against Voldemort's particular brand of terror. The death of Dumbledore and the razing of Azkaban could not be ignored, and the death or capture of three misguided students and a teacher did not balance those losses. Worse yet, the impact of turning some two hundred dementors loose was difficult to measure. He would have to check with the historians and the scholars from the department of mysteries, but Amelia would quickly need a tactical solution to deal with the dementors on a long-term basis.

While Scrimgeour currently had the weaker hand, he recognized that he had taken eighteen million galleons of resources away from the dark side and had already begun putting it to use. He also recognized the finality of using the death veil as his maximum security solution for marked Death Eaters or others convicted of murdering or attempting to murder an auror. Dumbledore wasn't around to present pointless arguments about the opportunity to "reform convicted

murderers.” The reality of the situation was that Voldemort wasn't going to offer his POWs fair treatment, or to suggest an exchange. Scrimgeour was going to make it less attractive for a witch or wizard to join Voldemort's side. Dead witches or wizards couldn't be broken out of prison.

... -- ...

Anna Daily and Connie Hammer made short work of the tip that Michelle Wood had received from Harry Potter regarding the secure portkey chain that had been stolen from the property locker and used to facilitate the Azkaban break-in.

A summer intern named Marietta Edgecombe was working the afternoon shift and quickly confessed to smuggling the six foot length of highly charmed gold chain out of the property room and passing it on to her mother.

Mrs. Edgecombe foolishly attempted to fight her way out of their home in Leeds and escape. The two hit wizards that Hammer and Daily had brought along as backup cut her down. The intern, Marietta, would be charged as an accessory in the death of nine aurors. A search of their home yielded three hundred thousand Galleons that Scrimgeour promptly confiscated and decided to split six ways.

Amelia's group would be handed the task of assessing the possible security breach to the floo system, particularly the passworded and unlisted portions, and contacting the owners to change the passwords and addresses as soon as possible.

... -- ...

Hermione asked to go home at dinnertime and Harry helped Freedom take her back. They hadn't really done or said much for the remainder of the afternoon and Harry was surprised when she asked if she could come back the next day.

Harry said, “I'll ask Freedom to pick you up at nine.”

She asked, “Could I watch you work with Michelle tomorrow?”

He replied, "Okay. Be ready at 7:45."

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and said, "Thanks, Harry." A moment later he was back in Welshpool and found himself wrapped in a desperate hug from Susan.

... -- ...

After a few minutes, Susan released her grasp and Harry kissed her on the neck and asked, "What's up?"

Susan chose her words very carefully and asked, "Did you and Hermione... ever... date each other?"

Harry had never really considered the question. He stalled giving an answer for a minute by going and getting a butterbeer. Objectively she was his best friend and she was certainly a girl, but he had never taken the steps to turn the relationship into a romance.

He struggled for an answer and hoped that it would make sense. "I never had any brothers or sisters and I never knew my parents. From the time that I was really little, it became increasingly obvious that Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia didn't want those roles. Dudley made sure that I never had any friends at primary school. He and his little gang would scare them off; so I was pretty much alone. Hagrid found me when I was eleven. They were hiding me out on a rock in the ocean in some little hut. He took me away from them and brought me to Diagon Alley. He helped me at Gringotts and bought Hedwig for me. I met Hermione and Ron on the train. They were the first kids who would ever talk with me. We became pretty good friends when Ron and I rescued her from that troll that Quirrel snuck into the castle."

He took a sip of his butterbeer and Susan wondered where the story was going, but had learned not to interrupt when he was on a roll.

He continued, saying, "We grew up together, I guess. I suppose that I thought about her as a girl a bit in fourth year, but nothing ever happened between us. Things have been on and off between Ron and I over the years. He couldn't see past the fame of being the boy-who-lived and see the pain and terror that has come with it. We didn't

say a word to each other for the better part of the first half of fourth year and he was mostly interested in Lavender's bits last year, so he and I haven't been as close."

He put his butterbeer down and went on. "Hermione got on me a bit last year to work more with Snape to study occlumency, but she couldn't accept that he was an evil git. She did help me survive Umbridge when she began her torture bit with that damn blood quill. Susan, to circle back to your question, she's a girl and she's my friend, but she's *not* my girlfriend. *You are* and I don't want that to change. She hasn't had things very easy at school and I hope that you could come to see her as one of our friends."

"So you're saying if she offered to dance in front of you naked, you'd..."

"Close my eyes and think of you," blurted Harry, hoping that it wouldn't get him slapped.

"Oh," said Susan. "Oh." She thought a bit more about what he'd intentionally or unintentionally told her. A bit nervous she asked, "Would you really like that?"

Harry looked her up and down for a moment and made eye contact. He said, "Someday, yes, very much. *You're* the one I dream of." She gave him a kiss and there was nothing chaste about it. When she broke free, he asked, "Are we okay on Hermione?"

She nodded and answered, "We are, Harry. Is she?"

He replied, "I think so. Are we okay with Hannah?"

"What do you mean?"

"She's your best friend. You two should do some things by yourselves sometimes. I don't want *us* to cause you to lose *you*."

She stuck her tongue out at him and asked, "When did you wise up?"

He said, "I think it was when I was walking down Diagon Alley and these two good looking witches called me over and fed me ice cream laced with wise-up potion."

... -- ...

Amelia arrived home about seven looking exhausted. In truth she was only back at about half strength and felt like she was ready to collapse on the spot. To her immense satisfaction, Susan and Harry had held dinner for her and Harry handed her a butterbeer. The sugars within it kicked in and she felt better.

They ate in relative silence and then Amelia asked, "What have you heard?"

Harry replied, "Just that he died and was found in the castle early this morning."

Amelia said, "He was expected to be away from the castle and no one felt that his not being at the table for breakfast seemed unusual. A house elf found his body this morning on a stairway by his office. It appears that he had a stroke or something like it and fell down the stairs late last night. None of the castle wards were tripped and there was no obvious evidence of foul play. He was one hundred and fifty one this week and most likely it was simply his time."

Susan and Harry looked at each other. One hundred and fifty one was incomprehensibly ancient when you are sixteen.

Amelia continued. "There was the possibility of a toxin being induced into his body based upon an extremely small sample of blood found on a poison dipped quill that was found in the possession of Severus Snape. Unfortunately, we don't have a sufficient size to test."

Harry asked, "Would it really do anyone any good to announce the theory that Snape killed Dumbledore with some new type of poison? It won't help the Professor and it would simply encourage other Death Eaters."

"You're saying that it is probably a question better left unanswered. Given the possibility that there are still more of Voldemort's supporters within the Ministry, I expect that you are right."

Michelle watched the conversation, but didn't comment. Harry was her principal and Director Bones was the boss. She enjoyed the honesty that they both displayed towards each other.

Susan said, "I think we have made Harry wait long enough to open his birthday gifts. Let's go sit in the family room and have a look."

They sat down and Harry was a bit overwhelmed. He had received more birthday gifts this year than all of his other birthdays combined. Amelia guessed and suggested, "Take your time, Dear. Why don't you start with this one." She handed him a book that Hermione had sent him. Harry opened it up and looked at it. It was a muggle book entitled *Coping with Stress*. Amelia looked at it and said, "It looks like a very thoughtful gift. Who was it from?"

Harry replied, "Hermione sent it." She nodded, lost in her own thoughts.

Amelia handed him another; this time a book from Hagrid. Harry smiled when he opened it. It was a handwritten book on caring for a phoenix. Hagrid loved animals. Amelia looked at it and suggested, "You should take care of this, Harry. It was handwritten by Sir Nicholas Flamel and is certainly one of a kind."

Harry said, "The last book that Hagrid sent me tried to bite me. This one looks useful."

Harry opened another dozen books from different DA members and the Hogwarts staff. He recalled a comment that Dumbledore had made to him in front of the Mirror of Erised about books and wool sox. There was a big box and Susan suggested, "Open that one next."

Harry opened it and saw that it was from the twins. He laughed when he looked at it.

Susan asked, "What is it?"

Harry replied, "A self-refilling case of butterbeer. The card says that it will refill itself ten times. It would be dead useful at school."

Amelia looked at it and commented, "It reads *To our favorite investor*. I take it you helped them start their shop?"

Harry nodded and answered, "I gave them a bag of galleons a year ago to start their shop. I'm glad that they were able to put it to use."

Amelia observed, "That was very generous of you, Harry. Those two do have a way of making the world seem a little bit brighter."

"They rescued me the summer after my first year. Uncle Vernon had locked me in my room and it was a bad summer."

The Weasleys had sent him four tickets to a Quidditch game. Harry smiled and observed, "Ron probably hated that they didn't get tickets to a Cannons game. London is at Birmingham. It's for the seventeenth. Can we all go?"

Amelia said, "We'll put it on the calendar." She handed him another rather large box, looked at the card and smiled.

Harry opened it and saw that it was a foe glass. Amelia quipped, "It figures. Do you know Alastor well?"

Harry said, "We talked a few times last summer. I helped rescue him from his trunk after the Triwizard Tournament. He's kept an eye on me ever since."

Amelia chuckled, "So to speak. He was my first Auror partner out of training. He saved my life once. Fortunately I had the opportunity to return the favor many years later. He had a nasty run in with the Lestrangle brothers."

Harry reflected, "He's good in a duel. I saw him last month. He helped Tonks."

Michelle added, "Keep in mind that, in a streetfight, not losing is almost as good of an outcome as winning outright. We'll talk more about that tomorrow."

Susan gave Harry a sly look and suggested, "Open mine next."

Harry did and he was very pleased. It was a man's platinum bracelet that had little links alternating between badgers and griffins. He exclaimed, "It's beautiful. I love it. Thank you."

She beamed at him as he put it on, knowing that he was being very sincere. She handed him another rather large box. He opened it, read the card and smiled.

"What is it, Dear?" asked Amelia.

"It is a wandmaking kit from Mr. Ollivander, three actually." He examined it and grinned. "He suggests that I ask Freedom if she would consent to giving me three more feathers. There is a holly kit already channeled for a phoenix feather and two redwood kits that have the same size groove. The note says that he thinks they would be a great fit for a beautiful witch."

"He *does* have good taste," observed Susan.

"May I see that, Harry?" asked Amelia.

"Sure," replied Harry, handing her the note. "What's up?"

She handed it back to him and said, "It is dated yesterday. No one has seen him in a week and his shop is closed."

Maybe he's just taking some time off after being attacked, commented Susan. "What's this one?"

Harry had been dreading opening the last gifts. He opened the first package and lifted an elaborately decorated pensieve out of the box.

"Oh my," exclaimed Amelia. "This *is* quite remarkable."

"What is it?" inquired Susan.

"This is the pensieve crafted by Perenelle Flamel. It was rumored that Dumbledore had inherited it. This is quite a treasure, Harry. It's

virtually priceless.” She looked at it for several minutes and asked, “What’s in the other box?”

“Dunno.” Harry opened it and saw that there were 48 crystal vials; each one had been stoppered up. He held one up and saw that it contained a silver strand. The professor had left him 48 different memories.

Amelia looked quite thoughtful for a minute and asked, “Did Professor Dumbledore say anything special to you when he met with you yesterday?”

Harry replied, “He talked about having me go through these memories as lessons throughout the year. He said that I seem to learn better by watching something rather than just reading about it.”

Michelle jumped in the conversation adding, “I would have to agree with him there, Mr. Potter. You have been an outstanding student, though you obviously brought a lot to the table.”

Bones glanced at Michelle for a moment and circled back to her original question, asking, “Did he mention any future plans, Harry?” She silently wondered if Dumbledore knew that he’d been poisoned.

Harry nodded and replied, “The Professor told me that he had planned on stopping by this evening.”

There were tears welled in his eyes and Amelia didn’t press him any further. She said, “I have a gift for you and Susan. She pulled two rather bulky bundles from a box that she had opened and said, “These belonged to my husband and I when we were first married. I would like the two of you to have them.”

Susan looked at Harry and they picked up their bundles. He nodded and said, “You first.”

Susan unwrapped her package. It was a full set of dragon hide body armor! She looked astonished and exclaimed, “Auntie, it’s amazing! Thank you.” It was the deepest blue that Harry had ever seen and rather thick. What was remarkable was how soft it felt on the inside given its thickness. She said, “Harry, open yours.”

Harry did and found that his was just like Susan's except sized and cut for a man. He was shocked at the wonder of the gift and remarked, "This is really amazing. Thank you so much."

Amelia replied, "You're both welcome. They're made of Ukranian Ironbelly. The Hungarian Horntail armor that was purchased for the aurors this last week is quality body-armor, but won't hold a candle to Ironbelly in terms of spell absorption; but at a cost of the added weight and thickness. I'd have insisted on Ironbelly for the aurors except the species is all but extinct and it simply isn't available in quantity. They will certainly stop a knife or a bullet. On these sets of body armor, the chest areas are the thickest and are said to be able to absorb a single killing curse. The arm and leg areas are necessarily thinner and will absorb a few of the most powerful curses or hexes in any area but would not withstand a killing curse. These are dangerous times. I would ask that you each wear them under your robes or regular clothing as much as possible when you go outside. It is remarkably cool to wear it in the summer and shouldn't be too much of a nuisance. I love you both. Please do this for me."

It was a touching moment from a number of dimensions. Amelia had certainly communicated to Susan her long-term acceptance of Harry, and for Harry, it affirmed admittance into a family where he felt loved, not smothered. He managed to say, "Thank you. We will."

... -- ...

Friday morning Harry got up early and was surprised to see Amelia up already and in the kitchen. She smiled at him and commented, "We're a family of early risers. She handed him a glass of juice and said, "Harry, can you show me your memory of what happened at Azkaban?"

He replied, "Dunno. I never tried getting a memory of a vision before."

She prodded, "It might work the same."

Harry extracted the silver thread from his temple and carefully swirled it into the ornately carved stone basin. She suggested, "Tap on the rune second from the left. At the count of two, we'll touch our wands

to the swirling gas. They took out their wands and at the count of two touched their wands to the gas.”

A moment later they were on the little island just in time to see the dementors float away. Even at a distance, they looked as horrible as Harry remembered from third year. Together Riddle and five Death Eaters walked the hundred yards or so up to the fortress walls. Harry said, “There’s Pettigrew. That’s the silver hand that Voldemort gave him the night that he got his body back.” Bellatrix and the others led the way while Voldemort walked a dozen steps behind them. She took delight in killing each of the guards that they encountered. The first four had been caught unaware and were simple assassinations. The others saw them together and were five against six. From a third person view, the Death Eater’s strategy was easy enough to see. Peter and the others each picked a guard to parry with while Riddle and Bella doubled or tripled up on them and killed them.

In little more than a minute, the memory of the fight had suddenly ended. They held hands and Amelia said, “Egress.” A moment later they were standing back in front of the pensieve. Amelia asked, “How many of these visions have you witnessed, Harry?”

He answered, “A dozen, give or take. The first one that I saw was Pettigrew and Voldemort before he got his real body back, when his horrible snake killing an old man. That was a few weeks before the last world cup before fourth year. They’re different than regular nightmares; somehow clearer, I suppose.”

Amelia replied, “Thank you for sharing that with me, Harry. I’m certain that was horrible enough the first time, let alone for a replay. It does however speak to the level of strength of the truly capable fighters that he currently has. Perhaps someday, you could show me your memory from the graveyard.”

Harry answered, “OK. I’ve relived it so many times. Once more won’t hurt.”

Amelia said, “Thank you, Harry. Perhaps tomorrow morning will work. I think Susan had an outing planned for the afternoon and we need to discuss the upcoming Wizengamot in the morning. What are your plans for today?”

Harry answered, "Susan and I are training with Michelle in the morning and Hermione asked if she could come over. If Freedom is willing, I would like to try the wandmaking kits. My new wand works a lot better than my old one. How about you?"

Amelia replied, "I need to finalize some organizational changes within the Auror division and attend several meetings regarding department budget requests. I should be home by six. Good morning, Susan."

"Hi Auntie. Hi Harry. Pass the raisins please." Amelia passed the bowl and Harry took aim and flicked one her way. It glanced off Susan's ear and landed in her pumpkin juice with a little plop.

She announced, "When we go swimming this afternoon, you'll get so dunked, Potter."

Amelia smiled as she got up to leave. "Enjoy your day, Dears."

... -- ...

Harry picked up Hermione a few minutes later. This time she was ready and was wearing a baggy exercise outfit and had a gym bag for her swimsuit and another change of clothing. She gave him a little hug and said, "Good morning, Harry. Is there anything else that I need to bring?"

Harry replied, "Michelle has all the equipment. We've got plenty to eat and drink. If you're ready, we should get going."

Hermione nodded and a moment later they were in the back garden in Welshpool. Hermione asked, "Are you sure that I won't be bothering you?"

Harry replied, "No. I'm pretty certain that Michelle will let you try this. Susan is just finishing. Did you bring your wand?"

Hermione replied, "Right here."

Harry suggested, "Why don't you have a butterbeer real quick before you start. You'll be glad that you did."

Hermione took him up on it and Harry asked Michelle if she would let Hermione try the simulator. She nodded and said, "Singles at ten seconds." Harry nodded and she directed, "Hermione, stand here please wand out."

Hermione nodded and stood where she had been told. She asked, "What would you like me to do?"

Michelle replied, "I will display a series of targets. If it is a bad guy, fire a stunner and try and hit it. You will have two seconds to try. If an innocent appears, do not fire. You will be measured on the percentage of appropriate targets that you hit measured against how many innocents that you fire at."

A few minutes later Michelle said, "That was fifty targets. Please have a seat, Hermione." Hermione didn't have to be asked twice. She gratefully accepted the butterbeer that Harry handed her. Michelle checked the counters and announced, "Very good, Hermione. You hit thirty-eight out of forty bad guys and left ten of ten good guys alone."

Not having received a perfect score she naturally asked, "Could I try it again in a little bit?"

Michelle didn't know who tired she was and replied, "Not unless you plan on sleeping the rest of the day. Give it a rest for a while. Harry, are you ready?"

Harry looked at Hermione for a moment and Michelle said. "Harry this isn't about contests, it's about improving your personal best. Blasting charms, doubles on fives for the first round. Wands out. Go." Harry saw targets at stations two and five and fired...

Five minutes later and drenched in sweat, Harry heard the words, "Wands down." Exhausted, he slumped to the lounge and grabbed a butterbeer. Barely keeping an eye open; he set it down and grabbed another. Michelle said, "That's better. 108 out of 122 and nil of eight. Harry, hit the pool for an hour. Susan, it's your turn again. Three second intervals for a minute. Get ready." Harry dragged himself up and walked away to get changed into his swimsuit while Hermione stayed to watch Susan.

"Time. Have a seat." A moment later she announced "Seventeen out of nineteen and nil of one. Good. Get changed, you two."

Hermione followed Susan into her room and they got undressed. Susan noticed a thin white scar that went from Hermione's left shoulder across the top of her breast down towards her right hip. She asked, "Was that where Dolohov hit you?"

Hermione nodded and replied, "Madam Pomfrey gave me potions to take for almost a month afterwards. You can barely see it now, but it was pretty bad for a while. There's a cost of being friends with Harry, but it's worth it."

Susan thought about her words for a moment, nodded and asked, "Did your parents get upset?"

"Yes, but fortunately it was already half gone by the time that mum saw it. They really don't have an idea of the potential viciousness of spellcraft." She paused for a moment and asked, "What's it like?"

"What?"

"Living with Harry. Living with your boyfriend?"

"Nice... Frustrating... Both I guess. I'd shag him senseless right now if he'd let me, but he's not ready. He's so kind and gentle and shy and then *bang*; he turns it on with a ferociousness that I'd never even heard of, let alone seen before." She pulled up her top and asked, "Tie me?"

"Sure." Hermione tied the string top into a sturdy bow. She hesitated for a moment and said, "Thanks for letting me come over, Susan. I'm not trying to take him away from you... He's just a part of..."

"I know. He and I talked about it last night. He asked that we be friends."

"I'd like that."

"Me too. Let's go wake him up." They went outside, and sure enough, Harry was lying on his floatie, snoozing. They climbed onto their

floaties and gently paddled around the pool for almost an hour, soaking up the warm sunshine.

An hour later Michelle came back and said, "Back to work. Break time's over. Out of the pool, you two." She conjured a basket of water balloons. Harry and Susan climbed off their floaties and got out of the pool. She said, "I'm going to toss this balloon at either of you. I want the one who is being targeted to apparate over to the other one and not get hit. Don't get hit and don't lose focus. Are you ready?"

They both nodded and she tossed the balloon Susan's way. Within a second, she was gone and was standing beside Harry. Michelle said, "Excellent. Go back where you were." She tossed another balloon towards Susan, this time a bit harder. Susan ended up on the ground by Harry, but all in one piece. Michelle said, "Okay. You got lucky that you didn't splinch yourself that time. If you can't apparate in time, duck or use a shield. Part of the exercise is improvising. Try again." She tossed the balloon at Harry who was gone before it left her hand. He apparated behind her, picked up another balloon and tossed it at her.

Splat.

"Potter, you are so going to regret that." She turned around and tossed a balloon at Susan who wasn't looking. Instantly he cast a solid bronze shield in front of the surprised teen and the balloon bounced off and hit the ground. Harry vanished the shield as quickly as it had appeared. The look of protective determination on his face told the hit witch that the exercise could get out of hand *very* quickly.

Fortunately Smidgen appeared and said, "Lunch is ready, Sir and Misses."

Michelle said, "Good, you two. Both of you are really improving your speed." She pondered what he had done to create such a shield, but didn't say anything.

They sat down at the table and had a nice lunch of ham sandwiches, crisps and a small salad. As they were finishing, Hermione asked, "Harry, what happened at the Ministry with Crabbe and Goyle?"

Susan pounded her fist in the table causing a water glass to fall off. Harry saw it, reached and grabbed it before it hit the floor and gave her a funny look as he put it back on the table. "What was that?" he asked.

"I just showed her what happened. They attacked Auntie, you reacted to save her and fired back, scooped up Auntie and were gone in five seconds."

Hermione understood the unspoken meaning of her outburst; everything wasn't open to ask about. She nodded and said, "I'm sorry."

Susan calmed down a bit and said, "Me too." The stress from the attack was still a very raw wound for her and she didn't want to discuss it over tea.

Somehow Harry knew that the best thing that he could say was nothing. He went to get a few butterbeers. When he came back, Hermione and Susan were hugging each other, each with tears in their eyes. In another moment of male inspiration, he went back outside.

... -- ...

Harry called Freedom over and thought about the three wandkits that he was holding. Freedom hopped up into the table and dropped a feather. Harry carefully placed the feather in the box that had the materials for his other wand. She sang a note, apparently expressing her satisfaction in what he had done. The little phoenix dropped two more tail feathers. Harry was about to pick them up to place in Susan's boxes when the little phoenix hopped in front of him to block his hand. Harry watched in rapt fascination as she shed two tears that landed on each feather and pushed the pearly liquid along the feather with her beak. She sang another note and hopped away; allowing Harry to carefully place the feathers in the boxes.

Harry stroked the phoenix and said, "Thank you so much."

... -- ...

Michelle came out with the two witches a few minutes later. They sat down at the table where Harry had been working and she reflected, "You each have faced the Death Eaters and lived to tell the tale. No more than a handful or two of the sixty ministry aurors can say the same thing."

She had their undivided attention. "Streetfighting strategy is pretty simple; stop the other guys before they hit you. I had a training class from a man you know, Mr. Potter, Master Auror Moody. I use his title, because he's earned it over and over. The first thing he told us was that rule number one was to always finish your shift. In other words, don't get yourself killed. Don't place yourself in so much danger that you won't get home. If you find yourself in that situation, leave if you can. Does that make sense?" The teens nodded.

She continued, "The strategy is pretty simple. It's the technique that takes a lifetime to hone and polish. Recognize the difference between planning and reacting. If you're going after them, you have time to make a plan. If you're caught off-guard, you can only react. Those two men who went after Director Bones only had half a plan. They never would have made it out of the building, but they might easily have succeeded in murdering Director Bones. Fortunately, you saw a situation and reacted in time to save her and to stop them from killing someone else."

She had managed to answer Hermione's question and offer a teaching point at the same time.

... -- ...

2 August

Saturday morning, Susan went to wake Harry up. He was in the midst of yet another bad dream or vision. Susan agonized for a moment about letting Harry finish the vision or helping him eliminate the pain. She let it go for a little bit, then picked up his hand and placed it on her breast over her heart. Almost immediately the thrashing went away and his breathing went back to normal. His eyes fluttered open and he saw her standing there and realized what she had done to end the vision. She leaned over and kissed him and whispered, "I love you, Harry Potter."

He soaked in the sound of her words for a moment and said, "Thank you. I can't remember hearing anything that has ever sounded so nice."

Susan blushed slightly at his heartfelt comment and asked, "Were you having a bad dream?"

Harry ran his hand through his unruly hair and replied, "No. We should probably go talk with Amelia. This is *really* bad."

... -- ...

McGonagall was livid. A casual observer would surmise that she had no lips. In an icy cold voice her Scottish burr rang out. "Mr. Crow, you've managed to record enough mayhem to last a lifetime and according to my calendar it's only the second of August. You've already put poor Molly into the hospital from stress and killed off a great wizard. Perhaps you should consider a new swimming costume for Miss Abbott instead."

The old scribe shook his head. There was blood dripping from his pen.

She picked up a business card that he had dropped. It read Jagged Epiphany. She had never heard of the scribe and decided to look her up in the school directory after conferring with Headmaster Flitwick regarding the fall schedule.

... -- ...

Chapter Sixteen – The Wizengamot

3 August

Susan ran to get her Auntie. They came into Harry's room a minute later as he was just sitting up in bed. In a worried voice, Amelia asked, "What did you see, Harry?"

"Voldemort is trying to get the Dementors to go someplace and attack people late next week."

"Did he say where?"

He gave an embarrassed look and admitted, "That's when I woke up."

In a timid voice, Susan squeaked, "Sorry."

Harry sat up and suggested, "Let me get dressed and we can look at it and also the memory from the graveyard that you wanted to see."

Slightly embarrassed herself, it occurred to Amelia that she wasn't interviewing one of the Aurors in her office, rather her niece's half-naked boyfriend in the teenager's bedroom, she said, "We'll get some coffee and see you downstairs."

... -- ...

Perenelle Flamel's pensieve was unique, among the dozen or so that had been constructed through the ages, in that in addition to allowing the viewer to hear and see what the owner of the memory experienced, they could also sense the emotions that the person had felt.

Amelia had heard of the powers of this particular masterpiece, but had never seen or experienced it. She knew that this was likely to be a pretty intense experience and wanted to shield Harry from having to relive those horrid moments of his life.

Harry asked, "Which memory did you want to look at first, the graveyard of the dementors?"

Amelia want to suggest that he review a happy memory of Susan and him snuggling on their floaties together, but in this case, duty called. She suggested, "Lets look at the vision that you just had; then we can look at the memory from the graveyard."

He pulled the silver strand from his temple. It was shorter than the other one that he'd shown her. The location was in descript and Voldemort was meeting with a hoard of dementors. Amelia saw some arm waving and Riddle holding up a hand and one finger. She heard the occasional hissing noise, but no words. He waved his arms and pointed in two directions. The memory ended.

Amelia replied, "I didn't hear any conversation Harry. How did he explain what he wanted them to do?"

Harry replied, "Dunno. Let me look."

He tapped on the rune and entered the pensieve. He clearly heard Riddle say, "Attack two places six nights from now. I want you to attack..."

He didn't understand at first, then it became clear; Parseltongue. The memory had ended and he said, "Egress." A moment later he was standing next to Amelia back in the kitchen. He answered her question, "He was speaking to them in Parseltongue. He wanted them to attack two specific places. I didn't catch where they were though."

Amelia nodded. The information was useful, but too general to be of much use. She asked, "Could I see the other one now?"

Harry nodded and asked, "How much of it would you like to see?"

Amelia needed to see the entire event and replied, "From the moment that you were ready to touch the portkey until you came back."

Harry replied, "That was about a half hour." He took a breath and drew his new wand to his temple. He thought for a moment and drew a long platinum strand from his temple and swirled it into the dish. After a moment, he exhaled and said, "That's it."

Amelia was about to tap the dish when Susan declared, "I'm coming with you."

Amelia knew that her Hufflepuff tenacity was kicking in and that her determined niece would find a way to experience this with or without her, and she relented. She asked, "Harry, would you wait outside, in case we get a firecall?"

He agreed, "Sure," then asked, "Susan, are you positive that you want to see this? It's pretty bad."

She replied, "Harry, we talked about scars. This is one of yours. If it is a part of you, then it is. We'll be back in a half hour."

Harry added, "They didn't all have their masks on when they apparated. He'll touch Wormtail's arm with his wand to call them."

Amelia nodded and asked Susan, "Ready then? I'll start it and on two, we'll go in. One, two."

They were in the maze watching a younger Harry and Cedric holding each other up convincing the other to take the cup as their own. Susan could feel that they were weary from having run the maze. *"Together then."*

She felt their surprise that the crystal cup was a portkey and their uncertainty whether this was yet another part of the maze. They watched as the little man dragged the huge cauldron down the hill carrying an odd bundle of rags. *"Kill the spare."*

She felt the shock, followed by guilt, that Harry had unknowingly led Cedric into yet another confrontation with some form of Voldemort. *"Bone of the father, unknowingly given."*

She felt his guilt over what he was unwittingly helping unleash as he whispered to himself *"Let it drown, please, let it drown."*

She felt the horror as a form emerged from the cauldron commanding, *"Robe me."*

She felt the humiliation and agony as Voldemort mocked Harry and subjected him to the cruciatus curse.

She felt the sheer conviction in his heart and he stood up, knowing that he was going to die and fired, *Expelliarmus*.

She felt the utter determination as he forced the beads of from the connected wands back into Voldemort's wand.

She felt the raw emotion as the man that she loved saw echoes of his parents for the first time in his life. She felt the sadness in his heart when, in the middle of a duel with a reborn monster, he heard the words, *"We'll only linger for a moment."*

She felt the conviction in his heart to escape and tell the world what had happened when the echo of Cedric begged him, *"Take my body back."*

She felt the sheer pain as he ran flat out on his badly injured leg, blood oozing from his side, dodging curses, grabbing Cedric's dead arm, and casting *"Accio Cup."*

She felt the pain momentarily abate when, absolutely exhausted he lifted his head up and panted, *"He's back... Voldemort's back."*

... -- ...

Amelia knew the approximate order of events and tried to maintain an eye for detail.

She saw the grave marked, Tom Riddle born 1901 died 1943.

She saw Pettigrew's face and memorized his voice.

She carefully noted the look of bewilderment on the Death Eaters faces as they arrived and hurriedly put on their masks. She recognized Crabbe, Goyle, Avery, Carrow, Flint, Malfoy, the Notts, Rookwood, Yaxley, and Macnair. Doing a hurried count, she estimated that there were 34 Death Eaters present.

She observed the Death Eaters as they watched Voldemort and fourteen year old Harry's wands connect in a life or death struggle. She saw the doubt in their eyes as Harry's sheer determination pushed the beads of light to Riddle's wand.

She felt her heart crush when Cedric begged Harry to take his body back to his parents. She watched in horror as Harry risked everything to honor a dead man's last request.

She saw her niece's heart break while observing the horror that her boyfriend had endured. Taking her hand, she drew her wand and said, "Let's go home now. Egress."

As Susan ran into Harry's arms, she grabbed a piece of paper and hurriedly made some notes then put them into her pocket. She admitted to herself that she had just experienced the greatest single act of defiance and sheer courage that she had ever seen. She silently cursed Fudge for squandering such information and hiding his head in the sand for an entire year.

... -- ...

The Wizengamot discussion chamber was shaped like the letter C to provide sightlines for both a presenter and peer to peer discussion. Officially there were no assigned spaces, though there were longstanding preferences. Created about the time of the founding of Hogwarts, the original fifty members had all been Lords or Ladies in their own right. There had never been much blatant sexism within the group, as it had been proven time and again over the years that offended witches could be just as deadly as wizards. Seats could be sold, and there were provisions for appointing the seat to another witch or wizard in the event of the death or permanent absence of an existing member. To clarify those successions, in the last four hundred years, new members were required to submit and maintain written succession instructions at the time of their induction to the Wizengamot. Stewardships were rare, but not unheard of.

The position of chief witch or wizard was significant for several reasons. First, they had the responsibility to set the agenda for hearing legislative proposals. Second, they presided over each meeting guaranteeing that they had at least some voice in almost

every issue. Finally, and possibly of the most consequence, they had authority to appoint stewards to fill seats on a temporary basis and to declare the seat vacated if unfilled for fifteen years. Stewardships were usually done if the successor was a child. The rules required that the main body ratify or reject a candidate presented by the chief witch or warlock to fill vacated seats.

Unless previously a member themselves, the minister of magic had a voice but not a vote within the conference. As Scrimgeour hadn't been a member, he had no voting privileges.

As Amelia and Harry walked in together on Monday morning, she saw that most of the other members were already there. They picked up their name placards and found two chairs together. Harry sat down next to her and looked around the room. The semi-circle of tobacco colored high-back leather chairs trimmed with brass buttons gave the room the look of old money. The lesser chairs in the gallery behind them were clearly designed to convey the message that they were there for the inferiors. Harry recognized some of the family names on the brass placards – Brown, Zabini, Flint, Longbottom and Abbott. He looked around and saw some others – Macallan, Walker, Wallace, Brooks, Bowmore, Ogden, and O'Hearn. All of the members were wearing identical plum robes. There was no rank or insignia on them except for the owner's monogrammed initials on the left sleeve.

In this case, Scrimgeour had been invited to preside over the meeting. There were two agenda items - filling the vacant seats and appointing a new chief.

Scrimgeour called the meeting to order and announced, "At this time there are four seats to be filled, from the house of Dumbledore, Malfoy, Edgecombe and Black. The succession instructions of Albus Dumbledore specified that the seat be offered to Minerva McGonagall, a reliable witch, on an unrestricted and complete ownership basis. Is she here?"

"I am," said a voice in the back. Harry looked to his right and saw Professor McGonagall standing there.

Scrimgeour asked, "Do you accept the privileges and responsibilities of the position?"

She replied, "I offer my pledge on my magic." That was the solemn vow offered by a witch or wizard to uphold the rules of the Wizengamot.

Scrimgeour replied, "You are hereby a member of the Wizengamot. Please be seated within the chamber." She found a vacant chair on the side opposite of where Harry was seated.

Scrimgeour announced, "The next position to be confirmed had been sold by Narcissa Malfoy and purchased by Gringotts bank. As goblins are not allowed as members, the head goblin has offered to transfer unrestricted and complete ownership of the seat to William Weasley; a reliable wizard. Is he here?"

Bill stood up in back. He answered, "I'm here."

Scrimgeour asked, "Do you accept the privileges and responsibilities of the position?"

He replied, "I offer my pledge on my magic."

Scrimgeour replied, "You are hereby a member of the Wizengamot. Please be seated within the chamber." He found a vacant chair in the center of the chamber.

Scrimgeour said, "The next seat was formerly held by Michelle Edgecombe. Succession would normally pass to her daughter Marietta. Is there any discussion on this?"

Amelia stood and said, "Marietta has been arrested and has confessed to stealing the portkey that was subsequently used in the recent sacking of Azkaban and the deaths of nine aurors. Her hearing and sentencing will be held tomorrow at four PM. In light of the near certainty that she will be found guilty and at a minimum sentenced to life, I recommend that the Edgecombe seat be declared vacant and left that way until a new chief is elected and can make an appointment."

Scrimgeour asked, "Is there a second?"

Augusta Longbottom stood and firmly said, "Seconded."

The vote passed. There were no nays voiced, though Harry believed that several people abstained. No one was going to publicly defend anyone involved in the murder of nine Aurors. The succession instructions only covered one generation of successors, if the designated successor for a seat was ineligible or dead, the seat was considered to be abandoned.

Scrimgeour announced, "The last seat, the Black seat has been held in stewardship for years by Dedalus Diggle. The seat was set to transfer in thirteen months, based upon the continued ineligibility of the designated owner, Sirius Black to occupy the seat, and the age of the designee, but there is new information regarding the situation. Amelia?"

She stood again and said, "Sirius Black was declared ineligible to occupy his seat because of the belief that he arranged the murders of the Potters in October 1981 and committed the murder of Peter Pettigrew. However, he had documented succession plans in place offering the seat to a wizard who was, at the time, a minor. Thus the seat was never declared to be abandoned. I have recently become aware of new evidence that directly contradicts both of those claims of guilt, and they are only claims as Barty Crouch chose not to bother to give Black a trial."

Scrimgeour asked, "What evidence is that?"

"Testimony by a reliable wizard and witch, as well as a minor wizard that they saw and spoke with Pettigrew in 1994. I also offer the visual pensieve memory of Harry Potter clearly illustrating Peter Pettigrew acting in the role of a Death Eater. Unless the majority objects, I ask that the memory be presented as evidence."

Harry looked around. He could see that a handful of the members were against the idea, but had nowhere near the votes to stop the presentation. He recalled that Amelia had explained that a wizard or witch was considered to be reliable when they were of age or had obtained a permit to practice magic and had no criminal convictions.

Amelia said, "Mr. Potter, please place your memory of the evening of the Triwizard Tournament into the solicitor pensieve." Harry did and then sat down. He'd dreamed it and discussed it and had been talked

into sharing it just days before, but understood Amelia's need to have it replayed. She started the memory which began at the last minute of the Triwizard Tournament and ended with Harry telling Fudge, *He's back*.

For thirty minutes they watched in absolute silence, respectful that they had just witnessed the murder of Amos Diggory's son and the terrifying rebirth of the deadliest wizard on the planet. As the Death Eaters began apparating into the circle, Amelia looked at Scrimgeour who nodded. She nodded to the two hit wizards who were in the back and Anthony Flint was stunned. Scrimgeour backed up the memory and they could clearly see Flint standing there putting his mask on. After regaining order, he continued with the memory until it finished. There was silence for a minute then Amelia said, "Mr. Potter, with your permission, I would like to keep a copy of that memory as evidence. May I?"

"Yes, Director."

She waved her wand and a second strand appeared at the end of her wand. She placed it in an unbreakable crystal tube like the ones that Dumbledore had used and stoppered it. When she was done, she gave Harry back the original. Connie Hammer and Anna Daily came down and marked the evidence bag then placed it inside and sealed it.

"That taken care of; there are depositions from nine reliable witches and wizards that Sirius Black was murdered by Bellatrix Lestrange on the evening of 28 June. As such, unless the majority objects, I ask that Sirius Black's succession instructions be read."

Again, there were the looks of dissension, but after the arrest of Flint moments earlier, it was much more subdued. Scrimgeour opened the envelope and looked at it for a minute. He said, "I would like to call a thirty-minute recess. Mr. Potter, Director Bones, could you come here, please?"

Harry had an idea what was to happen, and Amelia did too. They walked into one of the conference rooms and Scrimgeour closed the door. He said, "The short of it is, Harry, that Sirius Black left you his Wizengamot seat in his succession instructions. You can not occupy

two seats, so you have to either offer it for sale or transfer it to someone else.”

Amelia said, “Minister, can you give us a few minutes to discuss this?”

He replied, “I’ll be back in fifteen minutes.”

She asked, “Do you have any ideas what you would like to do?”

Harry replied, “The Weasleys already have a seat. I like to give it give it to Susan or Hermione.”

Amelia replied, “Harry, Susan will be given my seat in the next year. I can’t use it for jury trials as it is, except in unusual situations since, I am typically prosecuting them. You could offer it for sale. The Gringotts goblins reportedly paid a half million galleons to get a friendly voice on the Wizengamot. If you don’t wish to sell it, I believe that Hermione would be an excellent, if not unconventional, choice.”

“Why do you say that? She’s the smartest witch of my age.”

“Plainly spoken, the membership is made up almost exclusively of old-line families.”

Harry smiled at the thought of the old SPEW badges and reflected, “All the more reason for some new blood. What do I need to do?”

“If you want to have her installed today, you need to go find her and bring her back in seven minutes. I’ll collect an appropriate set of robes. Go.”

Harry thought of Freedom. “The little phoenix appeared and a moment later they were gone in a flash of flame.”

... -- ...

Harry appeared in the back garden of the Granger home and pounded on the door. Dan opened the door and saw that it was Harry. He asked, “Harry, what’s wrong?”

Harry replied, "Nothing. "I just need to see Hermione right away."

"Come in. She's just finished showering. What is it?"

Harry explained, "I have an extra seat available at the Wizengamot, but we need to be back in five minutes."

Not understanding a word that he said, Dan called, "Hermione. Can you come down?"

Harry saw her, wearing jeans and a pullover shirt. He blurted, "Grab your shoes and your wand. I have a seat for you at the Wizengamot, but we need to be back in four minutes."

"Harry, my hair is still wet."

"Are you a witch? We've had this discussion. Get your shoes."

"Where are you going?" asked Dan.

"London. We need to be there in three minutes," replied Harry.

Hermione ran through the house collecting her essentials and putting on her shoes.

A minute later Harry announced, "It's now or never."

"I'm ready."

"I'll have her back by dinner, Dr. Granger."

Hermione kissed Dan's cheek and said, "Bye Daddy. Love you."

... -- ...

A moment later they were back in the conference room. Amelia had a set of Gray robes ready. She tried not to laugh as she saw the two teens stumbling over each other to get ready. Hermione said, "This will be so much fun to see. Harry, how did you get the visitor passes?"

Amelia shook her head and said, "Miss Granger, your highly capable, but uncommunicative, friend is offering you a permanent seat as a full member of the Wizengamot, not a day pass in the gallery."

She looked at him, placed her hand on her hip, shook her head in mock-annoyance and threatened, "Harry Potter, when this is over, you have *so much* explaining to do. Honestly!"

Harry knew better than to try and defend himself. Seconds later, Scrimgeour knocked and asked, "Are you ready?"

They walked out and Amelia pointed to a seat in back and told Hermione, "Just sit here until you are called. It won't be long."

Scrimgeour called the meeting to order and said, "Mr. Potter, You have been named the owner of the seat previously owned by Sirius Black. What are your intentions for the seat?"

Harry said, "I am transferring unrestricted and complete ownership of the seat to Hermione Granger, a reliable witch." There was a fair amount of mumbling, as she was a known muggleborn.

Scrimgeour asked, "Is Hermione Granger here?"

Hermione stood and replied, "I'm here."

Scrimgeour asked, "Do you accept the privileges and responsibilities of the position?"

She replied, "I offer my pledge on my magic."

Scrimgeour replied, "You are hereby a member of the Wizengamot. Please be seated within the chamber." She found a vacant chair next to where Ben Abbott and Mrs. Zabini were seated.

Scrimgeour said, "Now that there are 49 seated members, the next order of business is to elect a new chief warlock or witch. Are there nominations?"

Lisa Brown stood first and said, "I nominate Amelia Bones." A wizard behind Harry quickly seconded the nomination.

Amelia stood and said, "Irrespective of the job that Professor Dumbledore did within the Wizengamot and the fine leader that he was, I believe that having a person who directs the school or one of the major branches of our wizarding world in that position seriously compromises the arm's length relationship that the different branches require to function effectively. As such, I respectfully decline the nomination as chief witch."

Augusta Longbottom stood and said, "I nominate Ben Abbott."

Amelia gave Harry a meaningful look and he stood and said, "I second the nomination."

... -- ...

Minerva watched in fascination as the side discussions took place for a minute. Harry had said less than a handful of words; yet within ten minutes, a choice that she would have considered all but unelectable was standing in front of them as the new chief warlock. In less than two hours Potter had a longstanding member of the Wizengamot removed and arrested as well as having tipped the election in a direction he wanted. She knew that she was witnessing the emergence of the most influential wizard of her lifetime.

Abbott called another fifteen minute break. Minutes later the newest members of the Wizengamot were together in a room with the new chief. Ben said, "Thank you for the vote of confidence, Harry. Getting appointed chief was the last thing that I expected. Do you have any recommendations before we proceed?"

Harry replied, "Two actually. First, have the hit wizards check everyone for the Mark on the way out. Second, please consider Mr. Diggory for the open position. He seems to be in favor of due process and he's anti-Voldemort."

Ben replied, "They both seem like reasonable suggestions. I need to go visit with some of the others for a minute. Thanks again."

As soon as he closed the door, Hermione lit into him. "Harry, you can't go telling the chief warlock how to do his job."

Minerva rebuked her, observing, "Hermione, Ben Abbott came in here asking for Harry's opinion, not mine or Amelia's. Secondly, I don't understand why members aren't routinely checked for the Mark. It is shameful that it hadn't happened before."

... -- ...

Per his wishes, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore was laid to rest on the castle grounds in the small section that had been reserved for students and faculty who passed away while at school and whose family didn't have other wishes. In Dumbledore's case, he had over a century of service connected with the school and no other living relatives, save Alberforth.

Virtually every living witch or wizard in Britain had been touched at one time in their life by Dumbledore, either as a student or due to his part in ending Grindlewald's reign of terror in the mid forties. That said, it was a logistical and security nightmare accommodating the safety and physical needs of the two thousand or so people who chose to attend the celebration of life service that had been planned.

... -- ...

Dumbledore's remains had already been entombed immediately prior to the service. Harry and a dozen current students, the staff and a few dozen others from the Order of the Phoenix had been invited. Celtic high Priestess Nytasha Abraxan gave the short but passionate eulogy. Susan held Harry's hand the entire time. Off in the distance, he could hear Fawke's mournful song.

Remus was asked to speak on behalf of the others. He stood and said, "My entire life has been connected to and improved by Albus Dumbledore. As with our friend Hagrid and so many others over the years, he chose to observe a wrong within the world and not ignore it. In Hagrid's case, it was the wrongful expulsion from school and the certainty of a lesser life. In my own case, it was the very real likelihood of being shunned, from the age of childhood, and never having the opportunity to attend school to acquire a proper magical education or to have school friends. Professor Dumbledore saw the need and righted those wrongs and for that I will be eternally grateful."

He continued, "Professor Dumbledore lived his life based on the motto of making the choice between what was right and what was easy. Each of us here has at least one personal example within our own lives where he made those choices and helped make the world a better place to live. I believe that he would want us to honor his memory by following his examples; fighting evil where we see it, offering opportunity where it is needed, and remembering to live life each day." He took one of the white roses that had been stacked in a pile and placed it on top of the white casket.

One by one the others came up and did the same. Minerva was last in line. She picked up two roses and intertwined the stems then placed them at the head of the casket. When she was done, Abraxan carefully floated the casket into the small crypt and sealed it shut.

... -- ...

After the service, Harry and Ron walked to the edge of the lake to skip stones and visit for a few minutes before leaving to avoid the huge crowd that was starting to gather for the 3 p.m. memorial. Susan and Hermione decided that the two friends needed some time together and waited under one of the trees with Moody keeping watch nearby.

"I heard that the new defense instructor was announced," exclaimed Hermione.

"Who?" asked Susan.

"One of the Aurors had requested a year off to teach. His name is Nick Straighthand. I heard that he's had thirty years experience with the Aurors and is also skilled at working with groups."

Moody caught those words and muttered, "Another flyweight. Potter's got more practical experience than he has and that Shunpike kid had more experience in crowd control. He's had twenty-eight years in procurement and supply." He took a sip of the Ogden's that had found a permanent home in his hip flask since his forced retirement from the force and muttered, "At least he doesn't carry the Mark like that greasy bastard, Snape did."

... -- ...

Three hundred miles to the southwest in Blackstone, Riddle pondered the events of the last few days. Comparing the war to a chess match, the loss of Lucius was at or near queen level. Malfoy had always maintained a measure of respectability which was useful in both politics and the financial support that could be obtained from the other conservative old-blood families.

Too many of the Death Eaters were viewed as wanted criminals and support from the neutrals had completely disappeared due to deaths of the Aurors at Azkaban. He was also aware that the publicized bounties on any of the marked Death Eaters created hundreds of potential enemies and the sources of his own revenue resources were slowly drying up. His latest reports indicated that the two Death Eaters who had been members of the Wizengamot, Flint and O'Hearn, were arrested just hours ago.

He knew that there was no way that he could win a prolonged war of attrition against Bones and Scrimgeour. For every Death Eater lost, he needed have to kill five Aurors and ten civilians to maintain parity. He would need to step up the direct involvement from the dementors and personally become involved.

Riddle calculated that all of these negatives were easily balanced off the recent death of his long time nemesis, Albus Dumbledore. With Dumbledore dead, Riddle considered that the average witch or wizard would be much less likely to try and take a retaliatory move against his Death Eaters. Realistically, the only remaining public obstacles blocking his complete domination within wizarding Britain were Potter and the three heads at the ministry.

Riddle reviewed his short-term plans

- Kill Bones & family
- Kill Scrimgeour & family
- Release the prisoners
- Kill the new Wizengamot head & family

He had too few competent resources without his other dozen Death Eaters. He decided that the repatriation of the prisoners would become his first priority, even if he lost five of the new Death Eaters to get five of the old guard back. Since they weren't being held in Azkaban, he decided to make his move at the one place where he was certain that they would be.

... -- ...

McGonagall was beyond livid. Struggling to maintain any semblance of composure she nearly shouted, "Mr. Crow, what were you *thinking*, inferring that a seventy year old lady would have even a fleeting thought of lust in her heart for a teenager? Such thoughts would *never* even enter her mind. And your portrayal of the new defense instructor is *totally* unprofessional. Hrmph! The man isn't even *evil*, why would you disparage him? *Surely* there is nothing dishonorable with managing supply and procurement. I myself have done exactly that as part of my own responsibilities for years. The nerve!"

Crow looked nonplussed.

She took a breath and continued, "And *stop* playing innocent with respect to the safety of those poor Weasleys. I *know* that you have discovered some loophole in your promise. Fifty points, Mr. Crow! Stop smirking! If school were in session, I would have you serving detention, cleaning up after the babbling of Hagrid's illiterate trolls..."

The old scribe was barely paying attention. He was doing a quick tally of the remaining required body bags. To divert the enraged Assistant Headmistress's attention, he left a carefully inscribed parchment with the words Tumshie – Independence Day. So there was no confusion, he was careful to remember to dot the i and cross the T. Deciding not to push his luck, he told himself that he'd ask her to order the body bags next time and left the building.

... -- ...

Chapter Seventeen – Courtroom Number One

Tuesday 6 Aug

On Tuesday morning Harry woke up at five. He finished applying the last coat of wizarding hardened lacquer to the three new wands hoping that they could be registered and tested before he had to go to the ministry for Umbridge's trial at eight. He found the work relaxing and hoped that he would have the opportunity to spend more time with the master craftsman in the near future. After he set them on end to dry, he went into the kitchen to get a glass of juice.

Susan got up at six and found Harry in the kitchen worrying a raisin back and forth across the table. She leaned over to kiss him good morning and asked, "Are you nervous?"

In truth, Harry had been stressing over facing the woman who had caused so much mayhem last year. He wondered what had caused her to act as she had. *Was she blindly following Fudge, doing anything to support his position that Dumbledore had been a delusional crackpot, and that I had been an attention seeking liar? If she had been, would that have excused her?*

Harry had stayed up late the night before talking with Amelia. She'd explained that in the trial portion of the Wizengamot, the fairness of the law itself was not the issue, rather the application of the existing laws in relation to a specific set of circumstances. Thus, in this case, the sentencing guidelines and the specific laws themselves were not up for debate. Her job as prosecutor was to orchestrate the witnesses' testimony to establish that Umbridge had in fact committed the crimes that she had been charged with. In this case, she had been charge with illegally calling the dementors to his neighborhood, spiking a cup of tea and a glass of pumpkin juice with veritaserum to get him to tell her where Dumbledore was, and repeatedly forcing him to write lines using a blood quill.

Amelia had reminded him, "Harry, you do not need to speculate why she did those things, simply clearly relate that she did them."

... -- ...

Back the breakfast table, Susan prodded in a gentle voice, "Harry, you're going to wear out that raisin. Either eat it or put it in the trash bin."

Harry looked up at her and replied, "Sorry." As always, she looked beautiful to him.

"We need to go in an hour."

He nodded and replied, "Okay. What do you recommend I wear?"

She flashed him a bright smile and suggested, "Your new gray robes will be good. I'll buy you lunch if they don't have anything. Malfoy's trial is at one. I'll bring your other robes and hold onto them for you."

"Thanks." He leaned over and kissed her forehead.

"Thanks. Harry, don't worry. You'll do fine in both trials." She didn't mind his monosyllabic answers, and tried not to press him to talk when he didn't want to.

He replied, "I hope so." He appreciated that she didn't press him incessantly when he wasn't in the mood to chat.

Susan noticed her aunt in the next room and suggested, "Auntie is having a firecall with Connie. If you're finished with the new wands, she can pop over and register them. Should I ask her?"

"Please."

A minute later Hammer was in their kitchen. She greeted them, "Hi Susan. Good morning, Harry. Are you going to show me your new wands?"

Harry went and got the two redwood wands and the new holly wand. Connie carefully examined them and said, "These look very well made, Harry. You'll need to complete this wandmaker registration form. There is a one-time, twenty-five galleon fee and then you will be a registered wandmaker. You will be required to register each wand that you make and list the foci, and shaft content. Then you will need to cast the registration signature spell on the wand and write down

the signature reading. As a registered wandmaker, if you sell or otherwise transfer ownership of a wand to another witch or wizard, you will need to record the transfer in this bound logbook.”

“That sounds like a lot of paperwork,” commented Harry.

“True,” admitted Connie, “but proper wand registration can help catch and convict criminals. Lucius Malfoy was stopped for carrying a wand that had no registration signature. Sign here, here, there, and here. Okay. If you have twenty five galleons, I will approve your form and register it for you this morning.” She smiled at Susan and said, “We can go out now and try out your first masterpieces.”

Harry signed the forms and dug the coins out of his moneybag and gave them to Connie. She showed him how to cast the registration charm on each of the wands and finish filling out the paperwork. Once he had finished, she suggested, “Okay. Let’s see what they can do.”

Harry handed one of the redwood wands to Susan and teased, “Witches first.”

Susan felt comforting warmth from the wand pass through her fingers as she held the wand. She knew that she could do things with it that could never be done with her old one. There simply was more magic in it. She asked, “What should I try first?”

Connie conjured a tree stump and suggested, “Fire a *reducto* hex at the stump.”

Susan took aim and cast *Reducto*. The fourteen inch stump was knocked over and there was a fist size hole in the front of it that penetrated about four inches. Connie flicked her wand and set it on end again. She examined the hole without saying anything. Most of the Aurors would have done less damage to the wood and she was certain the Susan hadn’t fired the hex as hard as she could. It was a powerful wand.

Harry suggested, “Try a shield.”

Susan cast *Protego*. Connie looked on in amazement. There was no shimmer to her shield, indicating that the shield was wavering. It looked solid. She ended the spell and said, "It looked different."

Harry asked, "How did it feel?"

She thought for a moment and replied, "Perfect. It just felt right somehow."

Connie conjured another stump, this one a bit farther away from the house and suggested, "Susan when I say go, please cast your shield in front of the stump. I'll fire a hex at it. We'll get some idea of how strong it really is. Susan nodded and Connie said "Go." Again Susan cast her *Protego* shield. Again it looked absolutely solid like a thick plate of glass. Connie fired her *Reducto* hex.

Instead of collapsing or absorbing the spell and wavering, a most unusual thing occurred. The energy from the *Reducto* hex simply ricocheted skyward. None was absorbed and none passed through. There wasn't a nick on the stump.

"Very impressive," remarked Connie, amazed at what she had just witnessed. A strong *Reducto* hex would almost always break and partially pass through a strong *Protego* shield. She doubted that anyone on the force could penetrate that shield with the same hex.

Harry thought for a moment and commented, "Freedom coated your phoenix feathers with phoenix tears. Your wands might be outstanding for defensive or healing work."

Connie suggested, "Susan, try casting a *Reducto* at the first stump with your usual wand. Aim a little lower so you don't hit the same spot.

She aimed carefully and cast the hex. Connie examined the stump afterwards. There was a hole about the width of a banana that penetrated the stump about two inches. When she hit the stump it had rocked slightly, but had not tipped. She estimated that overall the hex cast the second time had at least double the energy. She had no idea what the energy level of the shield had been, but it was many times more effective than a normal shield, and she had seen the teen cast it effortlessly.

Connie said, "Good. Harry, your turn. Try your old wand first." Bang! From thirty feet he fired the hex at the stump and it was knocked over and rolled a few feet. Connie righted it and examined the damage. It looked like it had been penetrated by a bigger fist some six inches deep.

She rotated the twenty inch stump a quarter turn and said, "Try your new wand." Boom! Harry did and the stump flew backwards at least twenty feet. She looked at the oak stump in amazement. The cavity was about the size of an American football!

... -- ...

Amelia watched out the kitchen window with a mixture of awe and sadness in her heart. She was delighted that their new wands worked so well, but a part of her felt that she was watching her children preparing to go off to war. She knew that the young men and women who went off to fight wars invariably lost a part of themselves. She silently prayed that when the time came, that they would both return home unharmed and could spend the rest of their lives delighting in each other's company.

... -- ...

Harry felt the irony as he sat down in the witness chair in courtroom ten. He looked up and saw the other Wizengamot members looking at him and remembered that more than a few had been prepared to judge him guilty only a year before.

Courtroom ten had facilities for a full jury trial but only a very small spectator gallery. In this case he saw that it had been filled with several of the students from the DA and the Hogwarts staff. Hagrid look uncomfortable crammed into one side of the area.

The trial itself was unremarkable. Amelia calmly made her points as she questioned Harry. She had presented the detention logbook and the depositions from Connie and Anna along with the photos that they had taken of the blood quill and the paperwork authorizing the two dementors. She clearly pointed out that Umbridge had signed for Fudge in the authorized-by spot.

In the jury box, Hermione barely maintained control as her friend described the hundreds of times that he had been forced to etch into his own hand. She noted that, if anything, he understated what she had done to him. She saw the shock on a few of the other members' faces as Harry related that she had told Snape that she needed a second bottle of Veritaserum because she had used it all trying to get him to tell her where Dumbledore was. Seated next to Professor McGonagall, she noticed her favorite Professor shake with rage as she watched the trial unfold.

Finally it was Umbridge's turn to have her say. She had not hired a solicitor and chose to speak in her own behalf. She said, "It was within my right to question the brat. He knew where Dumbledore was hiding and the minister needed to know the information so he could have him arrested. It was within my right as a professor to assign detentions to disruptive students and assign appropriate punishments. Other professors assigned unpleasant tasks for detentions. Professor Snape always made the little brats scrub out cauldrons by hand. Finally, I had the authority to call on ministry controlled resources. Potter is the one who should be on trial here today, not me. I have important work to do."

When Umbridge had finished, Amelia collected herself for a moment and made her closing arguments. "The charges filed against Delores Umbridge are sixteen counts of reckless endangerment of students, two counts of inappropriate direction of a restricted ministry resource with intent to harm a person and two counts of unauthorized administration of a controlled substance in dangerous doses. You have been given both oral testimony from a reliable wizard as corroborating physical evidence from the ministry investigators. I ask that you review the evidence and find Delores Jane Umbridge guilty of all counts."

... -- ...

Harry sat at the witness table alone. He had been very impressed at the job Amelia had done presenting his case. He hoped that it had been enough.

A half hour later the jurors came out of the deliberation room and sat in their chairs. Ben Abbott stood to read the findings.

He stated, "Delores Umbridge, you have been charged with multiple counts of three separate crimes. You will stand as the findings are read. On the charge of sixteen counts of reckless endangerment of students, the Wizengamot finds you guilty." There were several cheers from the small gallery as the finding was read. Harry assumed them to be from the DA. In fact, the loudest of the applause came from Flitwick and Sprout.

Abbott continued. "On the charge of two counts of inappropriate direction of a restricted ministry resource with intent to harm a person, the Wizengamot finds you guilty."

Abbott took a deep breath before he read the last finding. "On the charge of two counts of unauthorized administration of a controlled substance in dangerous doses, the Wizengamot finds you not guilty due to lack of evidence."

There was a cry of outrage from the small gallery. Hagrid shouted, "The bloody witch deserves to be pulled limb from limb and fed to the beasts." Abbott didn't even try to silence him, as he personally agreed with the man.

Abbott continued, "Ms. Umbridge, the parents of Britain entrusted you with the safety of their children. Your actions violated that trust both at the time and in the future. There is no doubt in my mind that you contributed to the delay in the discovery or, and in the ministry taking action against, the wizard who calls himself Lord Voldemort and his fanatical followers. As a result, people may die in the future who otherwise would have been safe in their homes. Shame on you, Delores Umbridge. Shame on you. It is my hope that you spend each and every day of your imprisonment contemplating what it is that you had done to find yourself in prison for what may well be the rest of your life."

Umbridge continued to sit there, looking for all the world as if she were the offended party in a civil dispute.

Abbott continued, "Sentencing will be as follows; for each count of reckless endangerment of students through the use of a blood quill, you are sentenced to one year in prison. For each count of inappropriate direction of a restricted ministry resource with intent to harm a person, you are sentenced to ten years. The total sentence to be served is 36 years. Hopefully your time in prison will be less eventful than the prisoners which the Death Eaters murdered in the last week and tossed out to sea to freeze to death. Enjoy your stay, Ms. Umbridge. This session is adjourned."

... -- ...

Hermione felt as if she had been punched in the stomach. *How could those biased fools believe that she had been guilty of eighteen crimes, but not the last two?* She was positive that Harry had told the truth, or as one of the other jurors had pointed out, the truth as he knew it.

Minerva sat with her hands on her knees as Abbott read the verdict. She watched the disappointment on Harry's face, recognizing that he had been the victim of almost each of these crimes. She kept reminding herself of the saying that her mother had told her when she was a little girl, 'Half of a loaf is better than none.' The other perspective was that Delores would never teach again, was out of the ministry, and was unlikely to survive 36 years in prison. In reality, if the dementors were to ever return to their positions at Azkaban, Umbridge would likely not last 36 months in the wizarding prison.

... -- ...

Amelia looked at the gallery and saw the look of disappointment on Susan's face. It had been her suggestion that the other students be called to the witness stand, particularly Hermione and Ginny Weasley. Amelia had felt that Hermione would have been a stronger voice as a juror than a witness, and went without a second witness. She would never know if the results would have been different if she had done otherwise. Such was the nature of prosecution.

She was surprised when she walked over to Harry. He hugged her and said, "Thank you, Amelia. No adult has ever stood up for me like you have. I appreciate that you took the time to listen and believe me."

She replied, "You're welcome, Harry. You will never know how much your trust means to me. The ministry will be a better place without Delores Umbridge in it."

Harry nodded and replied, "Let's go get an early lunch."

... -- ...

As they sat at their private table eating their lunch in companionable silence, Harry remembered Amelia's explanation of the afternoon trial. Malfoy had been pardoned of the crimes committed at Ollivander's. He was being charged with nineteen counts of underage casting of spells without a permit, and Apparition without a license. These were both misdemeanors and would result in a fine of a thousand galleons per count if convicted. Being a member of a terrorist organization such as the Death Eaters would be difficult for Malfoy to deny, and would carry a five-year sentence. The possession of an unregistered wand would carry a minimum of a 100-galleon fine and a maximum of one-year sentence. The attempted murder of an Auror would carry a ten-year sentence if convicted.

After Harry finished his lunch and Susan had given him a kiss for luck, he went into one of the vacant offices reserved for the Wizengamot members and put his new plum robes on. He wore his Ukrainian Ironbelly armor under them as he and Susan had promised to when they went out in public. In Harry's case, it gave the appearance that he had gained 10-15 pounds and Susan claimed that he looked handsome. He had wisely refrained from making any similar comments, though, in his observation, her wearing the armor gave the appearance of slightly adding to Susan's already near perfect bustline.

He was going to sit by Hermione and McGonagall, when Ben Abbott asked him to sit at the empty seat to his right.

Harry replied, "Okay," and sat down, oblivious to the envious looks from some of the long-time members.

Amelia was already there when the jurors walked in. She was not surprised when she looked up to see that Ben had asked Harry to sit next to him. It offered an interesting message to some of the more

conservative members that things had changed with respect to generations. Ben was well over a hundred years younger than Dumbledore had been and the most prominent member of the Wizengamot was also the youngest.

Contrary to Narcissa's earlier statements regarding a high-power defense for Lucius, no solicitor had been arranged to represent Draco. As Amelia began reading the charges against the blond hair teen, it became apparent to him that for once in his life neither his formerly rich mother nor father were there to cover for him; yet he didn't seem too worried.

Amelia asked, "Mr. Malfoy, do you understand the charges that you have been accused of?"

Unable to break old habits, he drawled, "Of course I do."

... -- ...

Harry paid close attention as Amelia methodically built a case against Draco. Starting with the easiest of the charges, she showed the photographs of the Dark Mark on Malfoy's sleeve and compared it to photographs of the Mark found on other convicted Death Eaters. Bound in the chair with the magical chains, she asked Connie to roll up Malfoy's sleeve and show the jurors the mark that was clearly burned onto the underside of his left arm in exactly the same spot as the other Death Eaters.

Connie and Anna testified that they had picked up the wand on the floor of Ollivander's and had tested it for spells using the ministry approved version of the *Priori Incantatum* charm. It recorded the last twenty spells that had been cast, the last two being a *Reducto* hex, the *Cruciatus* curse and a stunner. Flitwick testified that no Hogwarts professor would teach or allow the other eighteen spells that had been recorded on his wand to be cast at school; therefore they must have been cast outside of school.

Finally, she presented her case for the major charge of attempted murder of an Auror and finished off with the irrefutable charge of apparition without a permit. Tonks testified that she witnessed Malfoy draw on Wood, who did not have his wand out at the time and fire a

Reducto hex at him which would have been lethal had he not been wearing his newly issued Horntail body armor. Amelia presented photos that Connie had taken and had registered.

When it was his turn, Draco claimed no knowledge of how the underage tracking charm had been removed from his wand and suggested that the other wand and the ankle holster must have been planted on him. He made no comment regarding how the marks around his ankle, indicating that he regularly wore the ankle holster, had gotten there. He testified that he was only trying to get away from the Auror and had only fired the hex to slow him down. He surprised Amelia by admitting that he had freely taken the Mark as a show of family and personal support to a great cause.

Amelia ignored his disgusting remarks and concluded her case saying, "Minister Scrimgeour pardoned Draco of the charges of attempted abduction of Mr. Ollivander and damage to his shop, the nineteenth and twentieth spells cast on Mr. Malfoy's wand while in the company of another marked Death Eater. Professor Flitwick testified that the other spells recorded on his Mr. Malfoy's wand were not part of schoolwork. I believe that the evidence points to the conclusion that he illegally cast the other eighteen spells outside of school. We do not make a case for the spells cast on the other unregistered wand; simply that Mr. Malfoy was in possession of a second unregistered wand. The photographic evidence as well as testimony from two reliable Aurors indicate that Mr. Malfoy attempted to Apparate away after attempting to murder hit-wizard Michael Wood. Based on the evidence of the damage done to the body armor that Mr. Wood was wearing at the time, and the deposition from the manufacturer of that body armor, you have evidence that the intent was to cause great body harm or death to Mr. Wood. The charges for which Mr. Malfoy purchased a pardon for clearly indicate that he is cruel and violent man. The evidence of his attack on Mr. Wood indicates a continuation of that pattern. I ask that you find Mr. Malfoy guilty of all charges."

Ben Abbott stood and said, "Let us retire to the deliberation room and consider the evidence."

... -- ...

Ben took a firmer approach to the position of Jury Forman this time. He called, "Let's take an initial vote of the charges one at a time. A two thirds majority is needed for a conviction. How many believe that Draco Malfoy is guilty of being a Death Eater?"

To Harry's utter amazement the vote was 37 to 12. He exclaimed, "How could *any* of you vote against that? His *father* was a Death Eater. His *friends* were Death Eaters and by his own admission, *he* is a Death Eater. What standard of evidence are you looking for?"

Mrs. Zabini suggested, "Perhaps he was coerced into becoming a Death Eater, and was under the Imperius Curse." Harry didn't know whether to laugh or gag.

Ben replied, "Perhaps, but none of the previously convicted Death Eaters ever denied taking the Mark freely. We have more than enough votes for a conviction on that charge. How about apparition?"

The vote was 43 to 6.

McGonagall kept her composure and said, "He splinched himself in front of three witnesses, including his own *mother*. What more could you want? Surely no one would believe that it was a case of accidental magic."

There was no rebuttal this time. Ben asked, "How about the casting of the spells recorded on his wand?"

Harry was amazed that the vote was still 43 to 6. Abbott announced, "We have more than enough votes for a conviction on that charge as well. How about the attempted murder charge?"

Ben was disappointed that the vote was 36 to 13. If the majority of the members voted for conviction, but not a 3/4 majority, a second, and if needed, third vote would be taken. If three votes failed to produce a 3/4 majority, the charge would be declared, not guilty.

Ben stated, "The armor experts stated that the damage caused to the armor clearly indicated that without the armor the spell would have been lethal. Let's vote again."

36 to 13. Ben looked at Harry in desperation and asked, "What do you think, Mr. Potter?"

Harry replied, "I think the critical factors are knowledge and intent. The armor was issued between the time that Malfoy was put on the holding cell and the time that he got out. He had no way of knowing that they were wearing body armor. Based on the damage that was made to the horntail armor that Wood was wearing, it is obvious to me that Draco's spell would have killed Wood had he not been wearing it. Since he didn't deny casting the charm and didn't bother suggesting that he was under Imperious, I believe that he intended to murder Wood and escape."

Augusta Longbottom stood and stated, "Regardless of where you stand on the hereditary debate, I believe that it is critical that the message be delivered that serious assault, attempted murder, or the murder of any of our Aurors *will not* be tolerated. Mr. Abbott, please call for the final vote."

46 to 3.

Abbott said, "Thank you all for the careful thought and consideration. Let us go back and announce our decision." They filed back to the courtroom.

... -- ...

Amelia was surprised that they had deliberated less than an hour. She didn't know if was Abbott's style to take the votes quicker or the change in membership. Certainly removing two marked Death Eaters would have had some impact on the process.

She asked, "Mr. Abbott. Has the Wizengamot reached a decision?"

Abbott replied. "We have. Draco Malfoy, you are found to be guilty of all charges filed against you, and are sentenced to serve a prison term of not less than fifteen years. Further, you are required to pay a fine of twenty thousand galleons. If you can not pay the fine, twenty years will be added to the sentence."

Relieved at the decision, Amelia asked, "Do you have anything to say on your behalf, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco drawled, "A goblin is authorized to take the money out of my vault 2199." One of the Gringotts goblins produced a bank draft and Malfoy signed it. After he was done, Malfoy bragged, "I'll be out before the end of the month."

Scrimgeour, who had been in the gallery, smiled and replied, "Maybe you will, Malfoy. Maybe you won't. However, the last prisoner who tried to escape ended up on the wrong side of the veil. Keep that in mind as you count the days off."

... -- ...

Something was niggling at Harry when he was changing out of his Wizengamot robes. He finally realized what it was. Malfoy *always* seemed to know what the Death Eater's plans were in advance. For years Harry had thought that he'd been getting secret messages from his parents. With his father dead and his mother gone, that wasn't likely. Harry concluded that Malfoy might have some of the inner eye rubbish that Trawleney was always spewing on about. He went to find Amelia and Scrimgeour.

... -- ...

Wednesday morning Amelia woke up at five. She did something that she hadn't done in forty years. At Susan's insistence, she pulled on a set of dragonhide body armor. Scrimgeour had taken Harry's warning seriously, and in conjunction with the vision that he'd had the other morning, she had to believe that Voldemort was preparing to strike. If his last actions were to be followed, he would launch multiple strikes. She hoped to be ready.

They ate breakfast in relative silence. Susan broke the tension by flicking a raisin that landed exactly on the bridge of Harry's glasses. He looked up from his bowl and smiled at her.

Amelia looked at the two and remarked, "We should go, Dears. I'll just be a minute getting my things."

Harry hugged Susan felt that she was wearing her body armor and said, "Bring your new wand today, okay?"

She looked into his eyes and replied, "I will. Be careful yourself, okay?"

... -- ...

They saw Hermione talking with McGonagall as they walked in the Atrium that morning and waved. Susan saw Hannah and her mum and walked over to say hi for a minute.

Susan said, "I hope this gets over quickly."

Hannah replied, "Me too. Do you and Harry want to come over Friday afternoon? The weather is supposed to be perfect."

Susan thought for a minute and asked, "Can we bring Hermione too?"

Hannah replied, "Granger? Sure. Lunch is at noon. Inviting the competition now too?"

"She's not competition. She's..."

"An insufferable bookworm. Tell her to at least bring a swimsuit."

Susan didn't want to argue with her friend, and let it go. Amelia gave her a look to come along.

Scrimgeour decided to take the extreme precautionary measure of having all of those sitting in the spectator gallery check their wands at the door. Straighthand was standing outside the hallway when Harry, Amelia and Susan passed by. Harry was wearing his Wizengamot robes. Straighthand nodded at Amelia and said, "Morning Director Bones, Mr. Potter. Miss, all gallery visitors are required to check their wands here. Just place yours in this bag and you can collect it on the way out."

Harry had a flash of inspiration and said, "Ms. Bones is one of the witnesses. Witnesses aren't required to check their wands, correct?"

Amelia gave Harry a strange look, but didn't say anything.

Straighthand checked his instructions and replied, "You're correct, Mr. Potter. Good day."

As they continued down the hallway, Susan asked "Was that a plan or a reaction?"

Harry replied, "Yes."

Amelia said, "To keep this legal, Susan you will need to sit at the witness table with Harry and the others. Harry, you did fine yesterday. We'll get through this one too."

... -- ...

Courtroom ten differed from courtroom one in that number ten had a gallery that could possibly seat twenty-five people. The gallery in courtroom one could easily accommodate ten times that many people and it looked to Harry that every one of the seats had been taken. He recognized fifty students from Hogwarts, some parents that he'd seen over the years at the train station, a dozen Order members, all of the Weasleys who weren't witnesses, almost all of the Hogwarts professors, a dozen various ministry workers, reporters, and a hundred or so ordinary gawkers.

Inside the courtroom, Harry saw a dozen Aurors in their scarlet uniforms. He nodded at Michelle, who had requested the assignment.

Theodore Nott sat in the third row of the gallery in the end seat nearest the exit. He had managed to smuggle in an invisibility cloak and a dozen generic wands. He waited in silence for the trial to end. Sitting next to him were Lisa Rosier and Pansy Parkinson, who was wearing robes with the front open to the navel. Several of the other Hogwarts witches looked over at her obvious attempts at attention in disgust.

A minute later, the Wizengamot members took their seats and the trial was set to begin. Scrimgeour stood and announced, "Before we begin the trial, I want one thing understood; there will be *no* outbursts allowed from the gallery. You've had your warning. I have plenty of

cells available and the Aurors aren't afraid to fill em. The decent people are at war against Voldemort. The people on trial today are accused of siding with him. If after examining the evidence and the testimony, they are found to be guilty, they will go to prison or worse. There's a bounty out on Death Eaters; 50,000 a head. Today isn't about politics; it's about justice. Director Bones, please begin."

The nine defendants were brought in two at a time ending with Antonin Dolohov. Escorting them were four Aurors. Three of them were armed with their wands and to Harry's surprise, the fourth with a short barrel side-by-side shotgun. Each of the accused was wearing an anti-apparition bracelet and had their wrists bound together with handcuffs. For added security, once they were in place, they were bound together with a long stranded metal cable, looped together and locked with an ordinary combination lock. It bothered him that they had no solicitor present.

Along the side-wall, the Aurors had placed Draco and the two Wizengamot Death Eaters, bound in chairs, as they had emptied the holding cells to have as many Aurors on hand as possible. They were tied up with thick ropes. After they were all seated and in place, Amelia stood to begin the trial.

"Since the events that took place on the evening of 28 June are largely related, the defendants will be tried as a group. They are collectively charged with trespassing in a restricted ministry area, being a Death Eater, and conspiracy to commit theft. Additionally; based on their actions, they will be individually charged of varying counts of assault, attempted murder, assault of an Auror, or attempted murder of an Auror. Finally; several of the prisoners stand accused of illegal prison escape."

She paused for impact, and asked, "Do any of the accused deny being Death Eaters? If so, please stand and state your name."

None of the Death Eaters moved. Ben Abbott silently wondered what the vote would have been.

Bones asked, "Do any of you deny being in the Department of Mysteries on the evening of 28 June without ministry authorization?"

To her surprise, none of the Death Eaters made a move. Abbott was equally surprised. He looked at the gallery but didn't notice that Nott Jr. was not there.

Finally Amelia listed the depositions of Anna and Connie regarding the wands found around the department of mysteries that hadn't been claimed by the students. Each had been tested for previously cast spells. The last few spells cast were then matched against the depositions that the students had previously given. One by one, the Death Eaters were charged with attempted murder, or assault, or attempted murder of an Auror.

Bones asked if any of them refuted the charges.

No one moved. At this point, Harry began searching the room. He couldn't see anything wrong, but sensed that everything was going too smoothly. To make matters worse, his scar had felt wrong all morning.

Bones handed out the sentences. They ranged from seven years for those convicted of being a Death Eater and illegally trespassing in a restricted area to thirty-seven years for those convicted of multiple counts of attempted murder. Death sentences were handed out to the Lestrangle brothers who were also convicted of being escaped prisoners.

Again, she asked if any of them had a comment to make. This time Antonin Dolohov stood and said, "I do."

Amelia asked, "What is it, Mr. Dolohov?"

He replied, "My only regret was that I failed to cut that mudblood chit in half with my flame cutter spell."

There were shouts of outrage throughout the courtroom. In the gallery, Pansy Parkinson fainted on the floor tearing her flimsy robes and exposing her breasts, drawing significant attention from the gallery and several of the aurors. In the gallery, sports reporter Ron Wilson snapped a photo of the event. No one noticed Theodore Nott under his invisibility cloak pass each of the handcuffed Death Eaters a wand and open one side of their muggle handcuffs.

Bones cried for order, but the noise was deafening. No one heard the intruder alarm that Eric had sounded on the first level.

... -- ...

Minerva looked through the first chapters of a manuscript entitled Half Blood Prince and noted the highlighted passages. In a controlled rage, she turned to the old scribe and in a cold Scottish Burr demanded, "Are you to tell me, Mr. Crow that *all* of these people are to be left there to die without a wand in their hand? She's a bonnie lass an' her mum too, even if I don't agree with what they're showing when they're on the beach. And the others - I simply can't allow it. You changed things before with Malfoy, I must *insist* that you stop this."

The old scribe didn't say a word, but decided not to hand her the next section right now as he'd originally intended to.

McGonagall was not to be silenced, "You killed off Albus just because *she* saw fit to. Surely you don't intend to create *another* orphan, and what about Ron? For some *unexplainable* reason, people keep asking about him. Mr. Crow, you *can change* things... You gave your word that..." She saw the coversheet to the next chapter marked *The Firefight* and saw red dripping from the pages onto the terrazza floor.

She sat down and in a defeated voice, said, "Good day, Mr. Crow."

... -- ...

Chapter Eighteen – The Firefight

Somehow raiding the ministry building was infinitely more satisfying to Voldemort than sacking Azkaban had been. The guard at the entrance, Eric had actually asked to see his wand without realizing who he was. He recognized Bella a second before she killed him. The two last things that he did were to cry, “*Bloody hell!*” and hit the alarm rune. Unfortunately, rather than hit the lockdown rune, he merely sounded the alarm buzzer that was normally used to sound fire drills.

Riddle pushed the lifeless body aside and shut off the buzzer a second after it had sounded. He said, “Carrow, stay here with Yaxley, Mikken, and Travers. Keep the exits open. We will return within five minutes.” Riddle, Bella, and Pettigrew raced down the empty stairway to get to the courtroom level, murdering Hestia Jones as they descended the levels.

... -- ...

As Harry heard the bodyless words, *Avada K...*, inspiration hit him; he whipped out his wand and cried, “Accio Invisibility cloaks.” The cloth caught on Nott’s wand and the killing spell flew a foot to the left of Amelia. Nott had been standing along the wall by Draco, near the exit, about 30 feet away from Bones when he fired. Apparently he had planned on leaving immediately after having killed her. A dagger fell out of his pocket as he spun around in surprise. Draco tipped his chair forward, grabbed the knife, and cut the ropes that had bound him.

... -- ...

Tick

Harry was on the floor of the big rectangle courtroom. The courtroom itself was nearly the size of a school gymnasium. At one of the ends was the gallery crammed with at least 250 unarmed spectators. At the other end seated fifteen feet above the floor was the balcony where the 48 other Wizengamot jurors were seated in four rows of fifteen chairs, theatre style. On the side by Hermione and the accused were three exits – one for the Wizengamot, one on the floor level for the witnesses and the accused and in the back on the

highest level, one for the gallery. Hermione had been a juror in the case, as Amelia wanted as many light-side jurors as possible.

Hermione was in the front row on the exit- end, sitting next to Minerva Scrimgeour, the PM and Kingsley Shacklebolt were visiting and sitting in the front row on the other side next to former Minister Fudge. Bill Weasley was in the back row about center. Sitting at the witness table were Harry, Susan, Ginny, Luna, Neville, and Ron with Ron closest to the accused and Harry closest to the wall. She had seen Harry practicing with the hit-witch when she was visiting Susan. She recognized his reaction and instantly knew that something was horribly wrong.

Tick

Amelia stood in the front center with her back to the jurors, facing the witnesses and the accused who sat at tables on either side of her. Behind them, the gallery rose with ten stepped-rows of benches like long church pews. Reporters and photographers were crammed into the front row, at eye level from the perspective of a person standing on the floor of the courtroom. From time to time as the trial had progressed, some of the bolder photographers would fire off a flash and take a photo to document the event, which was also carried live via the WWW. Along the wall, beside the witnesses, stood the Aurors. Michelle Wood was nearest Harry. Next to her, closest to the Wizengamot were her brother Michael, and Nick Straighthand, who was to be the new DADA instructor. On her other side were Aurors Bob Sunset, Nymphadora Tonks, Richard Chambers, and other Aurors in their scarlet robes. Bones barely saw the jet of green light as it flew past her shoulder. She had been concentrating on Harry.

Hermione, Michelle and Michael Wood, Susan, and the nine Death Eaters all whipped out their wands about the same time. Michelle hit Nott Jr. with a *Reducto* hex in about the same spot where Draco had hit her brother. Unfortunately, Theodore wasn't wearing any body armor. By the time that the blast had ripped through his body he wasn't wearing his left shoulder either.

Nott Sr. and Jugson fired several killing curses into the gallery, hitting reporters Rianne Turpin and Cheryl Whiteheart. Their writing days

were over. Then they each fired an *Incendio* charm into the defenseless crowd, hitting some children.

Tick

Dolohov shouted, "Aim at the Aurors." He fired a blast into the jury box hitting Mrs. Longbottom, who couldn't get out of the way in time.

Hermione stood and carefully aimed at Rodolphus Lestrage. Her blast hit him in the handcuff, blowing large chunks of metal through his chest, seriously wounding him.

Tick

Mulciber fired a powerful *Reducto* hex at Michelle Wood's face. Fortunately, Susan saw it coming and cast her strongest *Protego* shield in front of the hit-witch, who had done so much to help her over the summer. The blast ricocheted off and hit the ceiling showering the juror's with debris. He fired again and she cast another shield. This time the blast bounced back and hit him in the face, blinding him.

Draco grabbed the knife and dashed forward to reach the man who had helped recapture him. He plunged the knife into Wood's neck and saw Susan Bones fifteen feet away standing next to Harry, with her back to him. He pulled the big knife out of Wood's neck and dashed to stab Susan.

Tick

Amelia saw Malfoy race to Susan at the same time that Harry did. As Draco raised the knife to strike, she hit him in the back with a solid *Reducto* hex at the same time that Harry hit him in the chest. The spells somehow hit each other, and Harry's school nemesis blew apart. Harry made eye-contact with Amelia who nodded at him.

Tick

Nick Straighthand watched in awe as Harry hit Malfoy. The teen had the fastest reflexes of anyone that he had ever seen. Unfortunately, the master of administration and filling forms out in triplicate would never get the chance to teach defense against the dark arts at

Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Rookwood hit him squarely in the chest with a killing curse. The Hungarian Horntail armor, while able to withstand a solid *Reducto* blast was no match for Rookwood's killing curse, which had five times the energy of the hex. His soul and life's energy were ripped from his body and he slumped to the ground, his wand bouncing and landing in a puddle of what had been Draco Malfoy's blood.

Tick

Jugson and Nott each fired *Reducto* blasts at Tonks. She was hit in the side and blown back, hitting her head against the wall with considerable force. Auror Richard Chambers retaliated by shooting Jugson in the chest with both barrels of the shotgun that he was carrying. The force of the blast blew Jugson off of his feet. He sat with his back slumped against the wall, and pondered his life for a few moments before closing his eyes for the last time. Nott fired a killing curse at the young Auror, who would never be home for dinner again.

... -- ...

Ben Abbot thought, *'Just when things looked like they couldn't get much worse, they did.'*

Lord Voldemort burst the double door apart, flanked by Peter Pettigrew, Marcus Flint and Bellatrix Lestrange.

Tick

Neville saw Bellatrix and picked up the double barrel shotgun. He pulled the triggers like he had seen Chambers do, intending to end the life of the woman who had caused his family so much pain. Unfortunately, his pure blood upbringing kicked in and it hadn't occurred to him that the weapon needed to be reloaded before firing. Bella laughed and said, "Does little Longbottom want to join his mummy? *Crucio*." She hit him with her very strongest curse and Neville fell to the terrazza floor, convulsing.

... -- ...

Alastor Moody heard the commotion and limped down the hallway as fast as he could. The retired Auror had been in the men's room and had missed seeing Theodore leave the gallery under his cloak. As he was about to open the door to the galley, the door burst open and terrified people started running out, knocking him over. By the time he would be able to get out from under the pile of people, the fight would be over.

... -- ...

Upstairs, Auror Dale Dawlish and a teenage witch appeared at the employee apparition point. Before he noticed anything, Travers and Yaxley had hit him in the chest and face with killing curses. He had been reassigned to shoplifting patrol when Fudge left office. The terrified shoplifter ran down the hallway screaming until Mikken silenced her with a killing curse.

... -- ...

Downstairs, Susan had a quick shot at Rookwood and fired a blasting hex at him, but hit the wall. Dazed from the near miss, he fired Dolohov's flame cutter curse at her. She barely got her *Protego* shield up in time as she crouched down.

Tick

Thinking that he would finish the young Auror off, Marcus Flint fired a blasting hex hitting Tonks in the stomach. From the jury box, Bones's receptionist, Randi took aim and hit Flint just above the knee, severing his leg. She called to the apparently comatose old wizards around her, "Do something other than watch, damnit!"

Tick

Pettigrew heard her and saw Fudge staring at the scene as if he was unable to comprehend what was happening. Fudge noticed the man who he had insisted had died a hero's death fifteen years ago, and realized that it was Pettigrew a second before the jet of green light hit him in the neck.

Tick

Riddle fired several killing curses into the gallery, believing that the resistance had all but ended.

Susan saw that Neville was in serious trouble and fired a *Reducto* blast at Bella. She just missed, but the evil witch ended her curse and focused her attention elsewhere.

Avery had a clear shot at Shackbolt and fired at the same time that Shack had fired at Nott Sr. Nott was stunned; Kingsley arched forward and fell over the front of the jury box onto the floor, dead.

Tick

Anna and Hammer saw Nott Sr. go down, only to be revived by Dolohov a moment later. Nott saw Hammer and pointed his wand to fire at her. The normally methodical Anna went berserk and fired three *Reducto* curses into Nott before he could fire back.

Riddle cast a killing curse at Scrimgeour who ducked. The curse hit Mrs. Zabinni who was standing right behind him. Kingsley had been on top of the PM on the floor protecting him a few seconds before. The smothered PM said, "I'm fine man, get in there and help." Only then did he realize that the woman lying on top of him was dead.

... -- ...

Harry took aim and fired two *Reducto* blasts at Riddle. Just as he cast, Riddle was jostled by Macnair. Riddle saw Potter fire and tried to get out of the way. One of the blasts was a near miss, and blew part of his left ear off. The other shot hit his wrist and blew his right hand off, causing his wand to clatter to the floor. Harry fired twice again, but Riddle had already rolled out of the way.

Tick

Bella fired a killing curse at Harry, hitting him squarely in the chest. She grabbed Riddle and shouted to the others, "Leave now." Flash! Just as her curse was striking Harry, Bozo the photographer had taken a photo.

Amelia saw Pettigrew and had recognized him from Harry's memories. She aimed and hit him with a *Reducto* blast, blowing the bottom of his spine apart.

McNair hit Scrimgeour with the Cruciatus curse. When he let it up to leave, Hermione hit him in the back with a stunner. She didn't notice Rookwood revive him a few seconds later.

Tick

As she was leaving, Rookwood and Bella cast *Incendio* and set the drapes in front of the Wizengamot box on fire creating a cloud of dense, black smoke.

... -- ...

Back on the lobby level, Arthur Weasley got off the lift just seconds before Eric had sounded the alarm. He hadn't seen Riddle, Wormtail, Flint, and Bella dash down the stairway, but he did see Travers standing by the guard desk and knew that he was a dangerous, wanted man. He also saw another Death Eater, Yaxley, and two others that he didn't recognize standing in the otherwise empty atrium. He had his wand out when he'd heard the alarm. He took careful aim and dropped Travers with a *Reducto* blasting hex, hitting him in the neck. His wife or daughter would never wear second hand clothing again.

Yaxley fired back at him and Weasley ducked back into the lift and pushed the down button as hard as he could. The doors closed taking him to the second level and out of danger.

... -- ...

As she was leaving, Lisa Rosier grabbed Ron Weasley and quietly cast an Imperius curse on him. She told him to move and he followed right behind her such that she could use him as a human shield. She cast *Coloportus* and sealed the stairwell door behind her. Sixty seconds later Riddle, Bellatrix, Avery, Rookwood, McNair, Rabastian Lestranger, Dolohov, Rosier and Ron made it to the lobby. Lestranger saw Travers and demanded, "Who did this?"

Yaxley replied, "I think it was Arthur Weasley."

Bella said, "Dolohov, take this one with us. We'll have some fun with him later. We need to go." They ran to the apparition point and were gone a second later.

Tock

From the time that Theodore Nott fired the failed killing curse at Amelia until Lisa Rosier sealed the door behind her was twenty seconds.

... -- ...

Bill Weasley watched in horror as the final ten seconds of the raid had taken place. He had been taking notes when the shouting had begun and hadn't noticed the first few spells. It wasn't until the shouting had turned into screams that he saw what was going on. He had been so focused on Voldemort that it wasn't until he saw Lisa Rosier hustle his little brother out the door that he thought to get up and go after them. Unfortunately he was in the center of the row and they had a ten-second head start. He dashed up the stairs as fast as he could and burst through the door into the atrium just in time to see his brother being side-along apparated by Antonin Dolohov.

... -- ...

Downstairs people were still dashing to get out of the gallery until only a few remained. Becky Abbott sat in the front row clinging to an inconsolable Hannah. Immediately to her left were two dead reporters, behind her were three critically burned second years. Frozen in fear, she had watched as her daughter's boyfriend had been tortured by the cruelest witch of the age and Susan's boyfriend had been hit by a killing curse from the same witch.

Amelia took charge and shouted, "Randi, get to St. Mungo's, then go to Hogwarts and get Healer Pomfrey. Go! Sunset, take two aurors and get upstairs. Hit the lockdown rune. Connie, you and Anna double stun those bastards and get some photos. Michelle, clear some room back there for the mediwitches. Abbott, get them helping

or get them out of here! Linwood, get the prime minister upstairs to safety.”

... -- ...

Ginny Weasley was still trembling at the site of the monster that Tom Riddle had become. She was desperately clinging to Luna and hadn't noticed that her brother had been abducted.

Susan looked around but didn't see Harry at first. When she saw him lying there, face down, she screamed, “Harry!” and ran over to him. Amelia heard her niece and made her way over to see if she could help.

Susan saw him there and thought of the little phoenix as hard as she could as she got to him. She turned him over and heard him groan. The front of his robes was smoking where Lestrangle had hit him. She tore off his robes and ripped off his shirt as Hermione reached her and asked, “What can I do?”

“Get these things off him,” cried Susan. The Ironbelly armor was quite hot to the touch as she unzipped the side. Over his heart was a red lightning bolt shaped mark that looked like a burn, but hadn't broken the skin. Freedom splashed pearly white tears over the mark, and within seconds it was nearly gone. Bozo leaned over and with a flash, and snapped another photo.

McGonagall, who had been standing a ways back, whipped out her wand and called, “Accio camera!” She admonished the pudgy photographer and shouted, “Have you no decency, man? Go help someone.” Hermione wished that her favorite professor would have transfigured the man into a pig.

... -- ...

Within minutes, every Auror in Britain was either in the courtroom or upstairs. Scrimgeour demanded that four of the Aurors help him levitate the wounded down into the Death Chamber. Ben Abbott shouted at him, “You can't *do* that Minister. They have *rights*.”

Scrimgeour replied, "Grow a pair, Abbott, and go see to your wife and daughter. They missed being killed by about three inches, each. You can argue with me about this when it's over. We don't have a secure place for em, and they represent a clear and present danger to all of us." Seven minutes later there were no living Death Eaters within the ministry building. Well over a dozen of the Aurors had volunteered to help.

The mediwitches arrived and began working on the wounded. Unfortunately, there were far more dead than wounded. Tonks was badly hurt, but was expected to live. Neville was in a coma and would be moved to St. Mungo's. Moody needed a new magical eye, but that could be replaced. The three second-years who had been burned in the gallery were treated and would only spend the evening in St. Mungo's. Within a few minutes, Harry's eyes were open.

Poppy had just arrived and saw her favorite patient lying on the floor with his shirt ripped off. "What happened?" she asked.

Becky Abbott replied, "Bellatrix Lestrange hit him with a killing curse. I saw it."

The room had gone stone silent at her words. Poppy asked, "Are you certain?"

Becky was emphatic. She replied, "I saw it and heard it clearly."

Susan nodded and pointed to Harry's bare chest, and said, "The mark was right there, but Freedom's tears healed it." Hermione nodded in agreement, her own tears streaming down her face. For once, Harry's bushy haired friend had nothing to say. Susan was about to say something about the Armor, but Amelia gave her the look, and she said nothing.

Poppy ran her wand up and down Harry from head to toe, arm to arm. There definitely was evidence of a second killing curse, but without question, Harry was rapidly regaining his energy. He wanted to get up, but knew better than to push his favorite healer past her limit. She compromised and said, "Remain still for a half hour if you can, then we'll see what we can do for you."

Harry nodded. Amelia and Susan sat by him each praying in their own way. Amelia gently smoothed his hair and counted herself lucky. Freedom was perched on Susan's shoulder and sang softly. A few minutes later, Harry closed his eyes and slept.

... -- ...

As Harry slept, Connie and Anna meticulously tallied the totals in their logbook based in initial interviews.

Death Eaters on trial

- Knott (K) – Daily
- Jugson (K) - Chambers
- Rodolphus Lestrangle (W,V) - Granger
- Rabastain Lestrangle (E)
- McNair (E)
- Avery (E)
- Rookwood (E)
- Mulciber (W,V) – S. Bones
- Dolohov (E)

Other Prisoners in Courtroom

- Draco Malfoy (K) – Potter/A. Bones
- Flint Sr (V)
- O'Hearn (V)

Arrivals

- Voldemort (W,E) - Potter

- Bellatrix Lestrange (E)
- Pettigrew (K) – A. Bones
- Flint Jr. (W,V) - Randi

Wannabes

- Lisa Rosier (E)
- Nott Jr. (W,V) – Michelle Wood

Atrium

- Travers (K) – A. Weasley
- Carrow (E)
- DE #3 (E)
- DE #4 (E)

... -- ...

Scrimgeour surveyed the carnage. Two reporters, five spectators, two from the Wizengamot, seven Aurors, a guard, and a former minister killed. Six wounded, two badly, and Harry Potter now had the inconceivable distinction of surviving two killing curses.

He couldn't really point to a winner. Eleven Death Eaters ceased to exist today. Those who fought for the light side gave as good as they got. Considering who was killed and who was repatriated, Voldemort arguably improved his hand today based on who he gave up and who he got back, but he had thinned his ranks.

Amelia and Anna Daily came up to him and Anna said, "Minister, I think you should come and see this."

Scrimgeour respected Daily and her work and asked, "What is it?"

She replied, "Over here, Sir. Take a look at this."

He looked at the yellow circles that she had drawn on the floor. In one circle there was a human hand, severed about four inches above the wrist. Another had the shredded remains of an ear. In the last circle was a wand. It had a dark finish and appeared to be made of yew. He had seen his share of body parts over the years, and enough to last a lifetime in the last fifteen minutes. Daily wouldn't show him just to show him, so he asked, "What about these?"

Daily glanced at Amelia then replied, "Sir, these belonged to V, Voldemort, Sir. Several witnesses saw him fighting Mr. Potter, Sir."

Heading off any premature depositions with Harry and Scrimgeour, Amelia said, He's still resting Minister, but Becky Abbott saw the whole thing. She's right over there."

As Scrimgeour went to see Becky, Anna asked, "State secret, right?"

Bones was inclined to say yes, but thought better. Any of hundreds of people could have seen Harry fight Riddle, so denying it didn't make sense. The knowledge that the monster could be picked apart was one of the few bright shiny moments in an otherwise horrible day.

On the other hand, she considered what this would do for Harry. Britain needed her heroes, and he certainly was one, but he was also sixteen and basically shy. She replied, "Let's see what happens when he wakes up. Have Connie take a few more photos and bag these up, please."

A few minutes later, Scrimgeour came back, found his administrative assistant and said, "Call a press conference in fifteen minutes."

... -- ...

McGonagall looked shaken as she put the roll of parchment down. In a defeated voice, she said, "Mr. Crow, you've had your pound of flesh and circumvented your own rules. You'd best heal everyone up and return to the beach."

The old scribe nodded and got ready to collect his things. It had been a hard chapter to relate and he was tired.

McGonagall looked at him for a moment and suggested, "Your fellow scribe, Chem Prof dropped off a report yesterday. He seems to have a new idea. Perhaps you should owl him and find out about it. Merry Christmas, Mr. Crow."

He ran his hand over his face, pulled out the flask of Ogdens and had a taste, then went back to his work. There was more to record.

Chapter Nineteen – Plans and Reactions

Wednesday 7 August

Harry returned home within an hour after the attack. Scrimgeour couldn't get Bones to budge with respect to parading Harry up to his press conference, but half of the reporters at the conference had already witnessed the attack first hand. Rita Skeeter had seen the Malfoy teen murder that Auror, and had plenty of photos of the day. She already had her article about Harry surviving a second killing curse written and ready to submit. In reality she thought that there was little that Scrimgeour could say that would surprise her. She was wrong.

Halfway into the dog and pony show, he produced a hand in a plastic bag and a wand, claiming that both had belonged to Voldemort! After the reporters calmed down a bit, he allowed photographs, then snapped the wand and burned both pieces as well as the stump of a hand. When the magical fire had died down, he vanished the ashes and asked if there were any questions. It seemed like everyone had a few, but he was tired and wasn't in the mood for flowery answers.

"How many Death Eaters were involved today?"

"Twenty-two, including those who were already in custody. Eleven escaped, the others are dead."

"Was he who-must-not-be-named really there?"

"Yes, Voldemort was there. He's a wizard. He can bleed, so let's drop the hyphenated crap."

"How many innocent people were killed?"

"Eighteen."

"How many bounties were given out?"

"Eleven. I'll personally deliver the drafts to Gringotts before I leave this evening."

“Do you feel that the bounty program is working?”

“Absolutely!”

“Do you feel that it is unethical to compensate ministry employees who are just doing their jobs?”

“No. Anyone is eligible. You could have captured one this morning.”

“Is it true that Harry Potter was hit with a killing curse and lived?”

“Yes.”

“Where is he now? Will he make a statement?”

“He’s resting. I would advise against attempting to bother him or slandering him in any way. Personally, I like both of my hands as they are.”

“Minister, are you saying that it was Mr. Potter who blooded Voldemort?”

“Yes.”

There were no more questions about the victims or what had happened to the Death Eaters from the reporters. According to perception, the announcement of eleven dead Death Eaters and a Dark Lord’s severed hand far outweighed the cost of two severely wounded and eighteen dead from the light side.

... -- ...

Michelle insisted on staying on duty, rather than taking time off. Michael’s wife handled the arrangements for the funeral that would be held Friday morning. She had a mixture of very raw feelings over the attack. She mourned the death of her brother and was angry about it, yet at the same time somehow felt vindicated that Mr. Potter and Director Bones had avenged his death. She felt that she had utterly failed Harry when she saw him get hit with the killing curse and was astounded when she saw that he was alive. She hoped that he would

find it in his heart to forgive her and vowed that she would not fail him a second time.

Madam Pomfrey had requested that Harry go home to bed and stay there until she came back to see him the next day. He wasn't feeling well enough to argue with her and was glad that he was at home instead of in the hospital wing or St. Mungo's. Freedom had fireflashed them from one of the offices so they did not have to see the crush of people that were waiting upstairs.

Susan refused to leave his side after he was home and settled into bed. She sat on top of the bedspread next to him and gently rubbed his neck. Within minutes he was sleeping. The little phoenix sat on her perch and softly sang to them through the night.

... -- ...

Amelia unfolded the *Daily Prophet* the next morning with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. The headlines and articles were all very positive.

Death Eater Attack at courtroom ten – Voldemort blooded by Harry Potter!

The accompanying article was accurate and had a very positive slant. It showed a photo of the hand and another of Scrimgeour snapping Riddle's wand. The other articles talked about 'the brave resistance that the ministry Aurors and ordinary witches and wizards had put up to fight back against the *disgusting filth* that call themselves Death Eaters.'

An editorial called for the immediate suspension of trials for Marked Death Eaters, calling it, 'an unnecessary risk of our resources.' She didn't agree with the article and hoped that Scrimgeour's bounty program wouldn't turn out to be too much of a double edged sword.

A few minutes later, a Gringotts owl arrived, providing notices that the following deposits had been made in their accounts.

-Susan – 50,000 Galleons

-Amelia – 75,000 Galleons

-Harry – 125,000 Galleons

She was happy to receive the gold, especially for Susan and Harry, but even more, prayed that they would both see the end of the war, unharmed.

... -- ...

In Blackpool, Riddle was doing his best to put himself back together. Of all the Death Eaters in his employ, the only one that he had come close to trusting was Bella. The others followed him either out of fear, the enjoyment that they received in basking in his reflected power, or belief in the ideology that he occasionally offered to garner support from some of the old-line families who mistook hate of all for a superior attitude against muggles and muggleborns.

The loss of his own wand was regrettable, but more of a nuisance than a real problem. In truth, it had been a poorer fit since his rebirth. He knew that the generic substitutes that he had been able to obtain in quantity were somewhat harder to use, but for the most part, he was using his to murder or torture, not craft jewelry or perform detail work. Using one of the wands, he was able to conjure himself a replacement hand, much as he had done for Wormtail.

The loss of the rat animagus was regrettable. He had been a highly willing, if moderately capable servant, and was often able to gather information that otherwise would have been hard to come by. Most recently, he had been able to pass through the weakened wards and torch the house where Potter's relatives had lived.

He grimaced as he thought of Potter. Never in his life had anyone bested him in a duel, and the agile teen had clearly done so. He was delighted when Bella told him that she had solidly landed a killing curse on the teen, only to hear a few hours later that somehow he had survived intact. Perhaps he was immune to killing curses.

He had lost all hearing in his left ear, and doubted that it would come back on his own. He was fairly certain that the blast that had almost hit him had burst his eardrum. Perhaps he would abduct a healer and

his family and get it fixed. For now, he had plans in place with the dementors for Friday night that wouldn't wait.

By ten he was as repaired as he could make himself. He had a silver right hand and had fashioned a replacement for his ear, and started a potion to see if he could improve his hearing. It would be ready in a few hours.

After deciding what he wanted, he called, "Rosier, bring in Weasley."

... -- ...

Amelia kept replaying the memory that she had borrowed from Harry in the graveyard. Something had been niggling at her regarding what she had seen. Finally it came to her, *Bone of the father, unknowingly given*. She remembered the headstone marked Tom Riddle 1901 – 1943. She needed to find Riddle's father's grave and remove all traces of the body, so that he would be unable to regenerate himself in the event that Harry was able to mortally injure him somehow.

Anna was happy to receive the assignment twenty minutes later. She had attended Uni following Hogwarts and was fully versed in the use of public libraries and the technology of the nonmagical world. It had been her idea that Amelia purchase a cellular telephone and she had patiently taught her how to work it. The birth and death records were fairly easy to search and she had found what she wanted before the library had officially opened for the day. Sometimes having a government security clearance and identification came in very handy. By noon the paperwork had been drawn up and the bodies of Riddle's parents and grandparents had been located, exhumed and dropped out to sea. She had the grave carefully refilled with the bodies of dead goats.

... -- ...

While Amelia was on the telephone with Anna, Flitwick, the other heads of houses, and the Hogwarts staff were meeting. They had a hard time believing what they'd seen yesterday, even though they knew it to be true. Flitwick had his attention completely on Harry the entire time and was certain that he'd seen Harry casting spells with two wands at once. More than anything he wished that he'd had his

wand with him yesterday as he would have been more than willing to have fired a few shots at the Death Eaters.

His heart had broken when he saw Harry get hit by Lestrangle's killing curse just as he was closing in on Voldemort. Susan's news, minutes later astounded him. He hadn't seen the body armor that Harry had been wearing. In reality, none of them had.

Poppy announced, "I have an appointment to go check up on him at nine. Perhaps you would like to come along for a visit? We could go visit Neville at St. Mungo's afterward."

Minerva and Sprout replied that they would come with in the morning and Flitwick would stop by the next night after dinner if it looked like he was up for visitors.

Minerva asked, "What are your plans for the defense position?"

Sprout added, "It's a shame, the first decent applicant in years; one with real experience, and we lose him before he even gets a chance to start. Maybe the minister could spare another Auror?"

Flitwick shook his head and Minerva replied, "Amelia lost an eighth of her force yesterday. We can't count on getting another Auror."

... -- ...

Meanwhile at the burrow, Arthur pleaded with his distraught wife, "Get some sleep, Molly. I'll wake you the moment anyone hears anything."

"Arthur, I can't. Just call again."

"Molly, Bill is at the Auror office. He'll tell us the moment anyone hears anything. Please get some rest."

"I can't. Is there any news about Harry?"

"Only that he returned home to Amelia and Healer Pomfrey was going to go and see him this morning."

"I wish Professor Dumbledore was here. He'd know what to do."

Arthur ignored the unintended slight and replied, "I'm certain that he'd suggest getting some rest so you'll be in a position to react if we hear something this afternoon."

"Maybe I'll have a short lie-in on the sofa."

"That's a good idea Molly. I'll wake you when I hear even the slightest news."

In truth, there hadn't been any news of Arthur's son. He hadn't seen the actual abduction and half expected to hear that Ron would have been killed immediately prior to their leaving the ministry building. Bill was certain that he'd seen Ron being forced to leave with McNair. With as much patience as any parent of an abducted child could muster, he waited.

... -- ...

At nine, Poppy, Minerva and Pomona Sprout arrived at the Bones' house. They arrived in the floo after Michelle tossed a bit of the white powder into the fireplace. As they were arriving, she called, "Company, Susan," which was a good thing as Susan was offering Harry some of the softer comforts to make him feel better. Susan zoomed down the stairs and greeted the trio, "Hello Professors, Madam Pomfrey."

Sprout replied, "Good morning Susan. Are you okay?"

Susan welled with tears, shook her head, and replied, "I was so scared. Suddenly they left and I couldn't find Harry. Then I saw him lying there with his shirt smoking from that awful curse. I didn't know what I'd do if he..."

Sprout reached out to hug one of her favorite students as she sobbed, "I love him so much. I should have helped him."

They held each other for a minute and Pomfrey gently asked, "Where is he, Dear?"

Susan sniffed and replied, "Upstairs, second door on the right."

Pomfrey walked up the stairs and found the door that Susan had referred to. She gently knocked on the door and said, "Harry?"

She looked him over and he seemed to be in much better condition than the day before. When she finished, she chided, "You don't have plans on making a habit of this, do you?"

She was shocked when Harry replied, "Madam Pomfrey, I'm certain that I will. I just hope to do better next time. I want to get on with my life."

Pomfrey was silent for a while then replied, "You have a lot to live for, Harry. I wish you the best of luck."

Harry looked at her and knew that she was being absolutely sincere. He replied, "Thank you, Madam Pomfrey."

"Poppy, Harry. All my favorite people call me Poppy, and when you're ready, I hope you kick his arse from here to Dover."

Harry smiled and replied, "Flinging the remains of his snakey arse over a cliff *does* sound good. I'll keep that in mind."

Poppy considered his living situation for a moment and asked, "Is there anything that you or Susan would need from me?"

Harry understood her meaning and replied, "No. Not yet. Thank you for asking."

She nodded and replied, "Let me know when you do. On to other subjects, a lot of people love you, Harry. Please be as careful as you can. Why don't you shower and get dressed, then come down to say hi to Minerva and Pomona? They came to see how you two were doing, and are visiting with Susan right now."

Harry asked, "How are Neville and Tonks?"

Poppy replied, "Miss Tonks is better. I stopped by and saw her early this morning. She should be released this afternoon, and will be home for a day or two, but she will be fine. Neville is still in a coma."

He's not allowed visitors this week. His long-term prognosis is not good.

Harry nodded and replied, "Thanks. I'll be down in ten minutes."

Harry came down a few minutes later. On seeing him, Minerva walked up to him and gave him a gentle hug, as if she was worried that he might break. She said, "You'll never know how much we worried about you yesterday Harry. We're delighted to see you. Are you certain that you should be up and about?"

"I'm fine," replied, Harry. Minerva had heard that line too many times and gave him her look.

"For once, I have to agree," added Poppy. "Harry seems to have made a miraculous recovery. If you're up to it, Professor Flitwick asked if he could stop over and see you tomorrow after dinner?"

Susan glanced at Harry, who smiled. She replied, "We would like that very much. He would be welcome to come for dinner if he could. We usually eat about six. Speaking of which, Harry is probably famished. Can you possibly stay for lunch?"

As much as she wanted to, Poppy said, "We do need to go. If you would be willing, Harry, I would like to stop again Saturday about this time, and check on you once more."

Harry nodded, and answered, "Thank you, and thanks again. We'll see you Saturday morning."

...--...

As they were eating their lunch, Michelle announced, "There is a big package for you, Mr. Potter. It arrived by secure courier."

"I don't know what that means," admitted Harry.

"It's for high value international shipments. Do you know anyone from Bulgaria?"

Harry thought for a moment and replied, "Actually, I do."

“Maybe you should open it,” suggested Susan.

Harry opened the letter and said, “It’s from Victor.” He read the carefully printed note.

Dear Harry Potter,

This is Victor Krum. I read that you fought the wizards who murdered Cedric. You are very brave man to do so. Yet you should fight wearing armor, I think. I am sending you hide from Dragon from here, Ukranian Ironbelly. My family makes armor for wizard police here and this is best kind. It will protect you. Please take hide to tailor and have two sets made for you. If you are hit by killing curse, armor will protect you one or two times. Better not to find out if third time will work.

You are good fighter, Harry Potter. When you are done, you come and see me. We fly together.

Sincerely, your friend,

Victor Krum

“Merlin!” exclaimed Michelle.

“Maybe I could take this to Madam Malkin,” suggested Harry.

“I’ll ask her to come out, Mr. Potter,” said Michelle. “I need to stop in Auror headquarters for a minute. I’ll be back in ten minutes.”

... -- ...

Bertha Jorkins was nothing like the wealth of information that Ron Weasley turned out to be. Riddle had originally had the Weasley boy summoned to him intending to try out his new wand torturing the teen, but a few seconds of Legilimency turned his interest in an entirely different direction.

He spent the entire afternoon tapping into the teen’s memories, meeting Harry Potter, his owl, adventures in the first year, opening the chamber of secrets, learning that Potter was a parselmouth, and liberating Wormtail.

Unfortunately the teen's usefulness waned sharply after his third year. Snape's insight seemed to be more accurate – Potters gift in life was possessing luck in huge quantities.

The activities that they trained on in fifth year with the short lived Dumbledore's Army proved interesting. The spellwork was school level, but he had practiced his execution. Potter had been a slackard in his studies and seemed obsessed with losing spectacularly to a decent chess player. However the DA training ended after a precious few lessons. Umbridge might be a useful ally. Black's old house had been Dumbledore's hideout but had been sold.

There appeared to be large gaps in the time that the boy had spent with Potter. Riddle recognized the jealousy that Weasley seemed to center on, but wasn't certain of the source. It appeared like he had a better overall childhood than the glimpses that he seen or that Potter had shared. More recently, the red hair teen seemed to be obsessed with a large busted classmate and had taken self-gratification to a level that even Riddle hadn't remembered. He actually checked to see if the teen's arms were still developed equally.

When Riddle was finished, Ron, who'd had no previous experience with Legilimency, felt nauseous. Fortunately, he thought that throwing up on he who-must-not-be-named's floor would end his life sooner and more painfully and wisely held it in.

Riddle called Rosier in. She replied, "Yes, my lord?"

"Take him back to his cell; tell the house elf to give him some food and water on a regular basis. No one is to bother him in any way. Pass the word along to the others."

"Yes, my Lord."

... -- ...

True to her word, Michelle brought Madam Malkin over. She looked at Harry with a mixture of awe and amusement. Here was the shy teen, who looked like he would pass out when she had one of the younger clerks measure him up. Yet she had read and seen photos

that he had bravely fought you-know-who and taken a killing curse like it was a love tap.

She decided that the hero outweighed the teen and said, "Good afternoon, Sir. How may I help you?"

Harry replied, "I need two sets of body armor made and I was hoping that you could make them for me."

Malkin replied, "I'd be honored, Mr. Potter, but I don't usually stock dragon hide."

Harry smiled at her and said, "A friend sent me this." Michelle and Susan held up the huge piece of the thick Ironbelly hide and showed it to her.

She carefully examined the piece and with a practiced eye announced, "I can easily make two sets and have a fair bit left over."

Harry hesitated for a moment. *'Perhaps one of the sets could be given to...'*

Susan saw his look and insisted, "*Both* sets should be sized for Harry. That's final. Would it be possible to get at least one back tomorrow morning?"

Malkin replied, "Of course, Dear."

Harry said. "Thank you, Ma'am. I really appreciate it. How much can I pay you?"

"Mr. Potter, that's not necessary. You do so much."

He dug a rather large handful of galleons out of his pocket to give her, but she stopped him and replied, "Mr. Potter, when you kick You-know-Who's arse someday, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to know that you were wearing some protective clothing that I'd made for you. Thank you for the opportunity to help in some way."

Harry finally understood what she meant, smiled and replied, "You're welcome. Thank you so much."

... -- ...

Harry woke up early Friday morning, surprised that he felt so well. Freedom had been singing all night and everyone in the house benefited from the healing effects. They had breakfast together as always. Amelia asked, "What are your plans today?"

Susan replied, "Madam Malkin is coming over at nine to deliver Harry's new armor then we're going to see Hannah for a bit. No one can see Neville, and she's pretty angry."

Amelia saw the troubled look on Harry's face and asked, "What is it, Harry?"

There were a handful of topics troubling the raven hair teen at the moment, but he surprised her when he announced, "I'm sorry I got your husband's armor wrecked..."

She guessed what he was really trying to say and gently asked, "Do you have many things that were your mother's or father's, Harry?"

He shook his head and replied, "Just my dad's invisibility cloak and a few photographs of them that Hagrid found for me when I was eleven."

Amelia hadn't spoken of her past very often to Susan, but it wasn't a forbidden subject around the house. She explained, "Stephen and I were twenty four and both of us were working at the ministry. We had known each other at Hogwarts and had started dating about the same age as you and Susan. Circumstances didn't allow us to get married after finishing school as so many did. I won't bore you with the mushy details Harry, but we were as in love as any two young people could be. We gave each other many gifts and I have many happy memories. I don't mourn the destruction of a set of armor that Stephen owned Harry, I'm grateful that it did its job after all these years. Don't be embarrassed that you are getting new armor, Harry. Your friend Victor is just doing what he can to help you win the war. If it takes two sets or a hundred, it will be worth it."

Harry nodded and Amelia offered, "I'll find out what happened to your parent's things Harry. Surely there must have been hundreds of

things that were recovered from their home in Godric's Hollow." She looked at her watch and said, "I need to be going. Enjoy your day."

Susan said, "Don't forget, Professor Flitwick is coming over for dinner. Be home by six."

Amelia nodded and said, "I will. Harry, try and wear the new armor for four or five hours off and on during the day or after dinner to get it to break in a bit for you."

... -- ...

Hermione had read several books describing the R&R that servicemen had received during their tours of duty. She hadn't grasped the absurdity of it before today. They were sitting on a beautiful beach by the ocean on a beautiful day not more than 50 hours after having taken part in the bloodiest battle to date of the war. The pieces of driftwood scattered along the beach reminded her of the severed limbs that she's seen. The cries of the gulls brought back memories of screams. They were desperate for some type of emotional healing.

There was no R&R for Neville or Ron, who hadn't even signed up for duty. They had become taboo subjects as everyone around them desperately clung to life and shreds of normalcy. The reality was that there was nothing to be done for either of them. Neville was on a near certain path to join his parents, and no one knew where Ron was. As their family members were the country's top decision makers, they refrained from much of the second-guessing that was running rampant at the Leaky Cauldron and similar spots.

Susan and Harry walked along the beach holding hands with Hanna and Hermione on their other sides. Susan took Hannah's hand and Harry reached out for Hermione as they walked along. There was no conversation as they walked away from the house for half a mile, each thankful for the physical connection from someone who cared.

As they made the turn to walk back, Susan finally spoke. She simply stated, "We reacted."

Hannah, who hadn't been part of Michelle's conversation replied, "What do you mean?"

"We reacted to the attack and, don't get me wrong, we reacted well, but we reacted."

Hermione disagreed, saying, "Susan, wearing full body armor is not reacting. You and Harry seemingly had a plan. Everyone else reacted, most badly. Ignoring the Gallery, the Death Eaters were outnumbered more than six to one. Half of the Aurors never got a shot off. The only other people in the Wizengamot box to even get their wands out were Randi and Mr. Shacklebolt. The Death Eaters must have thought that everyone would sit there like sheep to attempt such a plan."

Susan replied, "Most did, even with Randi screaming at them to fight."

Hannah added, "So you're saying that the ministry plan had been to disarm all of the potential bad guys thinking *that* would make everyone safe."

Hermione nodded and said, "Yes, except the good guys complied with the rule and the bad guys ignored it."

Hannah reflected, "So Nott snuck in a handful of wands and an invisibility cloak. He waited for a point where there was some confusion. Parkinson created a bit of a diversion and Nott untied the Death Eaters then slipped them each a wand. It wasn't a bad plan."

Harry looked confused, and Hannah asked, "What's wrong?"

He asked, "What did Parkinson have to do with this?"

Hermione bit her lip and Hanna sniggered.

She threw open her bathrobe fell to the sand and pretended to faint.

Harry had grown used to Hannah's antics and it didn't really sink in. Susan looked at Hermione and they began giggling uncontrollably. Hermione said, "He's yours, Susan. You'll have to show him."

To all of their surprise, she did. Imitating Hanna, she fell to the ground as her top slid off.

Hermione watched as her best friend stood gawking, open-mouth like a fish. Suddenly Hanna and Susan started giggling then laughing uncontrollably. All three of them noticed his emotional meter rising and had their individual reactions. Hannah put her terrycloth robe back on and sat on the sand, she was laughing so hard. Slipping her top back on, Susan was thrilled at Harry's reaction and her heart soared. Hermione had a reflective look in her face, remembering the eleven-year-old who rescued her from a troll.

As always, Harry had brought his cooler full of butterbeers. When they got back to the house, they sat under one of the big umbrellas and relaxed for a few minutes. Hannah asked, "If reacting is so bad, what's your idea of a plan?"

Hermione said, "You need to evaluate the likely scenarios and arrive at reasonable actions on a proactive basis to reduce response time."

Hannah said, "I'm not stupid, but let's use regular words."

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment and said, "Based on what I was told, when the Death Eaters attacked my Aunt's house at Privet Drive, they breached the wards somehow and sealed the house so no one could get away, then lit a bunch of fires. They had a plan and they executed it well. Depending on who else was involved, Voldemort and the Death Eaters had a pretty good plan on Wednesday, but they didn't execute it very well."

Hannah prodded, "Go on." Things always made more sense when Potter explained them than Granger.

"Someone must have tipped the Death Eaters to create a disturbance at 8:30." Looking at Susan for a moment, Harry added, "It sounds like Pansy was in on it. Someone should talk to her. Anyway, it could have been Nott, it may have been their solicitor, but somehow they knew. Riddle had it timed within seconds. Once they got untied, they had several choices to pick from. They could attempt to kill as many people as possible or they could have cleanly escaped. It seems like they tried to do a combination. Nott was ten feet farther away from

Amelia than he needed to be. He could have been on the close side of the door rather than the far side. He practically shouted his killing curse and I was lucky enough to hear him.”

He took a long sip of his butterbeer and continued, “Most of the Aurors must have thought that they were just there for show. From what Michelle told us, Eric was about the only person guarding the main entrance. He wouldn’t have stood a chance against that bunch. Mr. Weasley just happened to be walking by and hit one of them; then managed to get away.”

Hannah asked, “So what is a good plan?”

Hermione said, “Suppose Harry gets attacked tonight at his house...”

Harry asked, “By who?”

“Oh hell Harry, I don’t know, say, Voldemort and fifty dementors.”

Harry reflected for a minute and replied, “Depending on who was home...?”

“The three of you and Michelle.”

“Okay, assuming that Amelia and Michelle can cast a Patronus, we could each cast a quick form which would drive them all off within a minute. That leaves several people against Riddle. The best thing to do would be to try and get away. Having a portkey would be handy. I’d rather fight him in a closed area than in the back garden.”

Hermione replied, “That still seems a lot like reacting, but it might work. I like the idea of having portkeys and a cell phone.”

Susan shuddered at the very real possibility that one or all of their homes could be targeted just like Hermione described, particularly in light of Harry’s vision.

Hannah asked, “So you’re saying rather than try and invent a solution, we should already have at least some idea of what to do?”

Hermione replied, "It couldn't hurt, or at least have some idea of how to get away. They say that fortune favors those who are prepared." As she said the words, it occurred to her that she had no idea how she would get her parents away safely in the event of an attack. Little did she know that practical exams were less than twelve hours away.

Harry said, "We should get going now."

As they were getting ready to leave, Susan gave Hannah a hug and whispered, "I love you, Hannah. Be extra careful tonight, okay?"

Hannah hugged her lifelong friend back and replied, "I will. You, too. As she let go, she whispered, "Go easy on him. He's a keeper."

... -- ...

As the old scribe was handing off the installment of his tale he noticed McGonagall drafting a document. He glanced at it and read, Last Will and Testament. Apparently she didn't see her own prospects in an overly favorable light

With a heavy heart he walked away. On the way out he picked up a scrap of parchment. It read, Goblin Conspiracy – Lorelee Scribe – Found in the Gringottsvault. There was a large dot following the word vault. It must have been a clue or code word of some type.

Amazed that she hadn't chided him regarding the illustration of events at Folkestone, he nodded and walked away.

... -- ...

Chapter Twenty – Practical Exams

Tom Riddle was a very competent designer of battle plans. In this regard he was something of a realist and subscribed to three philosophies:

- Multiple attacks were exponentially harder to defend.
- Even the best plans are laid aside after the first shot is fired.
- If you really want something done; do it yourself.

With regards to the multiple attacks; he wasn't certain how well the dementors would perform as a battle group, so he only split them into two groups and gave them three seemingly simple tasks to perform – attack at the prescribed time, leave no prisoners and return to the meeting point seven days after the attack.

He had come to realize that the actual execution of his plans was inconsistent. Bella could be amazingly efficient; then fall into an old habit of talking down to her opponent, or in the case of courtroom one, wasting all of her time tormenting a helpless near-squib into insanity.

... -- ...

Pansy Parkinson was wearing old jeans and a loose top when she was arrested. She tried the hard talk for a minute until Sunset slammed her face into the decorative paving blocks that formed the patio in the back garden of her parents' home for the second time. A quick search of her bedroom yielded a hundred thousand galleons blood money, which would be split four ways between Sunset and Michelle as arresting Aurors and Harry and Susan as originators of the information. She admitted to helping Nott smuggle the invisibility cloak into the courtroom before Sunset slammed her face into the pavers for the fifth time. By the time she was thrown into the holding cell, she was missing four teeth, and had a badly broken nose. She was charged as an accessory to eighteen murders. No one bothered to call a healer.

Michelle finished the paperwork by eight and returned back to the Bones home for a quiet evening. Professor Flitwick from Hogwarts was coming over for dinner and she quite enjoyed his quick wit.

... -- ...

As Michelle was getting out of her Auror robes after the arrest of Parkinson, back at Crawley, Hermione and her parents were sitting down to a Friday evening dinner. Dan liked to grill, and Emma enjoyed the opportunity to visit with their remarkable, adventure-ridden daughter. Her stories of dragons and magical phoenixes seemed so much more interesting than the latest advances in fillings.

"The Wizengamot is very comparable to the British parliament," explained Hermione, "probably more like the House of Lords due to the inheritance aspect, except it also serves in a judicial function. The minister of magic is close in stature to the PM, except within the sphere of the magical world," explained Hermione for what felt like the fourth time.

"And you're telling me that your friend Harry *just happened* to have a spare seat in the wizarding parliament..."

"Wizengamot," corrected Hermione, without thinking.

"In the Wizengamot," repeated Emma "and he gave it to you, just like that?"

"More or less," admitted Hermione, "though the appointment had to be ratified by the entire body, which it was."

Shaking her head at the thought of her daughter's overly-generous friend, she said, "I know that you will do a good job and always balance the greater good application of the law with the rights of the individual. We're proud of the woman that you've become." The young witch had no way of knowing how closely her mothers words resembled the last words spoken by Dumbledore to Harry.

They talked until a few minutes before ten when Dan announced that he needed to go in and see something on the telly. Emma and Hermione followed him in and Emma locked the back door.

A few minutes later, Dolohov, accompanied by Yaxley, Carrow and Mikken had apparated to within a quarter mile of the Granger residence and had walked the remaining distance in the gathering darkness. As Dan was sitting down, and Emma was getting them cups of tea, Hermione felt the crackle as the anti-apparition wards were being put up.

Recalling Harry's description of the attack at the Dursleys, she had an idea what the Death Eaters' plan was. There was no doubt in her mind that they were under Death Eater attack. She fished Daily's calling card out of her pocket and shouted, "Dad! Call this number. Tell them that the Death Eaters are outside."

Her bossy nature kicked in and Dan knew that he should not argue.

"Anna Daily," said the voice on the telephone.

Dan said, "My daughter is Hermione Granger. She told me to tell you that there are Death Eaters outside our house."

Anna replied, "Leave the connection open, Mr. Granger. Help will arrive shortly." She burst into action.

... -- ...

Boom!! Hermione blew the back door apart. In her no-nonsense voice, she told her parents, "Stay down and don't let any of the flashes of light come near you. They are here to kill us."

Surprising Hermione, Emma dashed to the panty cupboard and pulled out her twenty gauge Holland and Holland over and under skeet gun and a handful of shells. Her husband had insisted that they join the Barnsfield Golf and Hunt club when they moved into the area before Hermione was born. While Dan golfed, Emma frequently went twenty five for twenty five shooting skeet and she did not flinch under stress.

... -- ...

Outside, Yaxley was just about done sealing the house as Dolohov finished setting up the wards when the back door exploded outward.

Carrow and Mikken had torched the roofline. However the Granger household was mostly made of brick, so the house itself didn't lend itself to arson. Further complicating their plan, Yaxley had sealed the windows so Mikken couldn't just break them and set the inside on fire.

They gathered out the back of the house and alternated casting *Incendio* and *Reducto* hexes through the open door.

Inside, Dan had tried to put out the fires, but his five-pound home extinguisher was soon empty and they were in need of a different strategy. The fire was quickly burning the kitchen cabinets. One became apparent as Carrow and Mikken dashed through the door.

Boom! Emma fired, hitting Carrow, and Mikken was hit by a *Reducto* blast at the same time that Hermione was knocked to the floor by a near miss. Dolohov had seen the gun work at courtroom one and knew that it only worked once. As such, he was not afraid when he saw the woman point it at him as he cast the *Cruciatus* curse on her daughter. It was the last mistake that he ever made. Yaxley was a foot behind Dolohov and had been hit by a few pellets but was not seriously hurt. He raised his wand to cast the killing curse on the teen witch when Dan proved that it was possible to hit something with a one iron. Yaxley's wand snapped and his arm was broken from the impact from the forged head. Yaxley did the only reasonable thing – he ran away and was hit by simultaneous stunners from Anna and Connie.

Anna called, "Mr. Granger? Ministry Aurors. Are you all right?"

Dan yelled, "We're in here. Come in one at a time and show some identification."

Anna yelled back, "I'm Anna Daily, the investigator who you called. I have my ministry badge in my right hand. My left hand is empty. Connie and the others are outside putting out the fires." She walked in and saw the three Death Eaters on the floor, but didn't see the Grangers who were hiding on the other side of the kitchen. She asked, "Who else is hurt?"

Dan stood and a moment later Emma did too. She was still holding her shotgun and was ready to use it. Anna asked, "Where is Hermione?"

Dan looked at her identification. He had no idea what to look for, but it looked authentic. He nodded and Emma said, "She's over here. She was hit by a piece of plaster when a green light zoomed by."

Just then her cell phone rang again.

... -- ...

Rufus Scrimgeour was at home with his family out in the back garden. His wife daughter, son-in-law and their new granddaughter were over visiting for the night. Cellia Scrimgeour was just pouring her daughter another glass of wine and toasting their new granddaughter when McNair, Rookwood, Avery, and Rabastan Lestrangle hit Cellia, her daughter Jennifer, and their son-in-law, Olliver with killing curses.

Rufus never believed that he needed a bodyguard. He himself had served in that capacity on several occasions, and, if anything, felt overqualified to take care of himself. He watched in horror from the doorway to the back of his home, as he saw his daughter slump to the ground dropping his only granddaughter as she fell. He fired a *Reducto* blast that hit Avery in the face; then ducked as Rabastan and McNair fired killing curses at the spot where he had been standing a moment before. From a prone position he fired again hitting Lestrangle in the ankle, separating shoe from shin.

McNair went to pick up baby Lisa who was screaming. It was the wrong thing to do. Scrimgeour cast the most powerful stunner that he had ever cast. McNair was blown back and impaled on one of the legs of the overturned picnic table. Rookwood banished the infant into the swimming pool and ran away. Rufus ignored the fleeing man and dove into the pool to save baby Lisa. When he finally pulled her out of the pool, she wasn't breathing. He ran as fast as he could to the edge of the anti-apparition wards to get her to the hospital.

... -- ...

Meanwhile in Folkestone, the Abbotts were sitting outside in the gathering darkness listening to the sounds of the surf. Becky had given Hannah a small glass of wine while Ben was enjoying a cigar. With only a moment's notice, Hannah felt a deathly chill in the air. Becky felt the same and in a low but urgent voice, cried, "Dementors! Get inside."

None of the Abbotts had any previous direct experience with a dementor before. Hannah had seen a few from a distance during one of the quidditch matches several years ago, but nothing prepared her for the bone chilling cold that gripped each one of them. She had almost been able to cast a patronus in the final DA meeting, and found her happiest memory – Susan's smile when she saw Harry staring at her hungrily. She cast and a nearly formed mermaid flew from her wand.

The fifty dementors floating around the house saw the patronus and knew that the witch casting it would soon grow weak. Becky pulled Hannah inside and went to get Ben when several floated by glazing her in an uncontrollable chill.

Hannah screamed.

Ben, still ruffled by Scrimgeour's chide to *grow a pair and protect your family* had stayed outside without a plan. He collapsed to the ground and a dementor floated down to the ground by him. It easily lifted the man up with one long arm and lowered its hood, ready to feast on the man's soul.

Hannah thought about Harry's little phoenix as hard as she could, begging it to come and help them, and a second later it flashed in front of her. The dementor saw the flash of fire and dropped Ben. Hannah focused as hard as she could on her happy memory, as the little phoenix sang a note of encouragement. *Expecto Patronum!* A fully formed, bright silver mermaid dove from her wand and swam through the air after the dementors. Before the mermaid began to fade, the dementors had started to fall back. Focusing with all of her might, she cast another mermaid and it succeeded in driving the dementors away from their home.

Becky ran to Ben, awed at the magic that she had seen her daughter do. He wasn't breathing. Becky cried, "Hannah, see if you can ask Harry's phoenix to take us to St. Mungo's."

She ran to her mum and dad. She felt the cold as she picked her dad's hand up and mentally begged Freedom to take them to St. Mungo's. The little phoenix looked indecisive for a moment; then hopped on her shoulder to fireflash the three of them to the hospital.

... -- ...

They arrived at the lobby of St Mungo's at the exact time that Scrimgeour had arrived. Becky shouted, "Healer!"

A moment later, the little phoenix disappeared.

... -- ...

Back at the Grangers, two mediwitches and a back up team of six Aurors had arrived. Some put the fires out while the mediwitches looked at the unconscious teen. She was not otherwise visibly injured; she was breathing and not bleeding. Mediwitch Renee cast *Enervate* when Anna's cell phone rang.

Anna asked, "How is she?"

Renee answered, "She'll be okay. I'll give her a pepper-up potion and we'll watch her for ten minutes."

Anna replied, "Leave it here. There are multiple emergency cases at St. Mungo's."

Renee replied, "Thank you. Bye."

Rudolphus, who had been stunned several times, was bleeding out on the floor. There were no mediwitches to help him due to the volume of calls that they had received, and the other Aurors were outside tending to the fire and searching the perimeter. He stopped breathing a minute later.

... -- ...

The other team of Aurors was out at Scrimgeour's home. There wasn't much to do, other than check for survivors. Scrimgeour's wife and the young couple were covered up and the junior investigator marked the area with a yellow circle.

The remains of Avery the Death Eater were splattered all over the patio floor. McNairs's glazed eyes stared into eternity; a leg of the overturned picnic table stuck out the front of his chest.

Sunset found Lestrangle, who had crawled halfway through the yard missing the bottom of one of his legs before he had passed out from blood loss. By the time Sunset had found him, Bellatrix's brother-in-law had gone ahead into the next life.

Daily and Connie appeared a moment later and were about to start their work when Anna's cell phone rang again.

She picked it up, listened for a moment and said, "Everybody needs to get to Director Bones home now." She called the mediwitch and told her that they needed a team sent to Welshpool immediately."

... -- ...

McGonagall had no distractions this time when the old scribe walked into her office. She gave him a stern look when he set the short roll of parchment down and scolded him, saying, "You didn't finish the assignment, did you?"

The scribe would have preferred that she had used the adjectives efficient or concise, and said nothing.

She looked it over and scolded, "But you did manage to get in a product placement against our specific instructions. Also, we need to discuss the last assignment in more depth. Did the Chem Prof goad you into that gratuitous nude scene at Folkestone?"

The old scribe hung his head down and she knew that her hunch had been spot on. Remembering something else, she nearly lept at him in anger. "Exactly *what* are your plans regarding Mr. Weasley? Surely you must recognize that he is a teen of modest skills, and it would not

do him well to leave him unattended for too long. Besides, there was *one* inquiry into his whereabouts.”

The scribe looked nonplussed and searched for another interesting document from his fellow storyteller, Lorelee.

When he left she noticed a scrap of paper on the floor marked Tip-Top Secret. With some trepidation, she picked it up and looked at it. The list of phrases didn't make much sense and most had been crossed out

- Scary Place

- Deathly Hallows

- Really Nasty Rites

- Final Act

- Last Billion

Deciding that it didn't concern her, she tossed it into the fireplace.

... -- ...

Chapter Twenty One – Phoenix and Snake

Old-Crow Scribe

A half hour before Hannah and her parents were fireflashed to St Mungo's, dinner was winding down at Welshpool. Michelle had finished relating her story about the Parkinson arrest when she said, "I'll have a look outside for a while. Thank you for dinner."

Amelia poured Flitwick another cup of tea and Smidgen brought Harry and Susan butterbeers. Susan had talked Harry into wearing his new set of body armor to break it in a bit. He had it under a black shirt and jeans.

Flitwick was telling them about Harry's schedule for the fall. He pulled out a rather extensive reading list and said, "These will be the books that you will need for the various lessons. Poppy told me that she had several picked out that she would be bring over in the next few days. I believe that Whipcrack from Gringotts has recommended several of their own investing manuals that they have translated into English." You won't have a lot of homework, as most of the lessons will be practical.

Harry handed the list to Amelia who had seen the defensive books that had been on the list. She commented that the list looked quite comprehensive, but noticed that Harry wasn't paying attention. He scrunched up his forehead a few times and gulped down his butterbeer. Setting it down he said, "He's here."

... -- ...

Michelle was outside on the far end of the property when she felt the icy wave of cold. As fast as she could, she ran toward the house, but she was too far to make it in time. Surprising her as she almost stumbled; the dementors swooped past her without stopping. She didn't see the four stunners connect with her. Three hit her armor and were absorbed without impact. The fourth hit her in the back of the head and she fell.

Harry saw what had happened, pointed his wand at her and called, "*Accio Michelle.*"

It wasn't the best idea that he'd ever had. She zoomed through the air and with a smack, impacted with him, knocking them both over. Harry felt like he'd been gang tackled and could barely stand. Shaking off the pain, he saw that the hit witch was breathing. As he was clearing his head; he noticed the momentary crackle as Riddle put his anti-apparition wards in place.

There were two entrances to the brick home, one in the front and the other in back off the kitchen. Harry and Susan were in the back with the unconscious hit witch while Flitwick and Amelia were watching the front. For nearly a minute nothing happened. Susan managed to revive Michelle, though she looked like she was injured somewhat.

Boom!

Both doors were blown open and within seconds, 150 dementors started floating into the home! A wand in each hand, Harry cast patronuses two at a time. The stags lept from his wands and chased after the dementors within the confined area. Harry watched them for a moment then held both wands in his right hand. Focusing on his love for Susan he cried, *Expecto Patronum*. A solid white stag lept from his wand. Harry could hear his hooves clatter on the floor! It gored the closest dementor with its antlers. The dementor seemed to deflate like one of the floaties from the pool, all the while howling a horrible sound. Freedom trilled and Harry cast another. The two solid stags went around the house goring the helpless dementors, who, for the most part, were unable to get out. Finally the last handful of them escaped out of the front door. As they were leaving, Harry hissed at them in Parseltongue, "Go back to Azkaban or I will hunt you down." He slumped down to the floor, exhausted.

Susan dashed to the ice box to get Harry a few butterbeers. She brought them back and he slammed the first one down before the green jets began zipping through the open doors. Harry gulped as much of the second bottle down as he could and noticed that Michelle had her eyes open. "This is it," he said, "the big one."

She smiled at him having heard her younger brother's pep talk too many times as they were growing up, and replied, "The one we've all been waiting for."

Susan looked at the two of them like they had gone round the twist, and asked, "You do know where you are, don't you?"

If they didn't they were reminded in the next second. Four new Death Eaters, Hedges, Reynolds, Redman, and Myers burst through the front door and began firing as with Riddle's horrible snake Nagini slithered in. At the same time Riddle and Bella began working their way to the back door.

In a surprisingly steady voice, Harry said, "Michelle, help Flitwick and Amelia if you can. Susan and I will hold these two off until you three can get back here." For a second, Harry recalled his father's final words to his mother and vowed not to fail.

Amelia had done a remarkable job maintaining her fighting skills over the years as she moved farther into the ranks of management. Flitwick really had deserved to be a dueling champion, and the years since had not dulled his skills too badly. The three of them fired at once, each hitting their target. Within moments, they had gone from a four-three fight to a one-three fight. Amelia was on one side behind a sofa and Flitwick and Michelle were trying to circle around the other attacker. Without warning, Amelia felt Nagini sink her fangs into her thigh. She turned around and blasted the evil snake to pieces, but it had already done its job.

Seconds later she slumped over, having a hard time breathing.

Meanwhile, Flitwick and Michelle were trading shots with Redman, who seemed to have far better skills than the first three idiots that they had gone against. Michelle dashed to the left to get his attention. As she did she called, "I got em."

Redman stood and fired a killing curse, missing her by fractions of an inch. As Redman fired, Flitwick hit him squarely with a *Reducto* hex then fired a binding hex on him. It wasn't necessary; he was already dead.

... -- ...

Meanwhile, Harry was in the fight of his life. In sword-fighter's terms he was trying to parry with them in an attempt to keep them out of the house as long as possible.

Susan knew that Harry was tempted to go out and fight the two of them. She said, "Harry Potter, don't you dare go out there until you are ready." Harry watched in horror as two jets of green zoomed her way. Susan ducked, but the table that she had been hiding behind cracked twice and split in half. He fired back at Lestrangle and nearly hit her before she dashed out of the way.

... -- ...

Amelia regretted that she had let Susan and Harry down. She knew that her chances of ever seeing them again dwindled with each passing second. She had insisted that Harry and Susan each wear their armor and she had fallen into the age old parental trap – do as I say, not as I do - and had left hers in the closet. Thinking of her last wishes, she hoped that Susan and Harry somehow managed to end this fight, grew old together and spent their days making beautiful babies together. She loved them so much.

She was comforted to see the baby phoenix hop on her shoulder; then surprised that it fluttered onto her leg by where the snake had bit her. Somehow the phoenix communicated what it wanted her to do and she pulled up her robes above the bite. The little phoenix shed a dozen pearly tears; each splashing into the bleeding wound where the fangs had struck.

Slowly the pain subsided and she found that she could focus a bit. When she looked again, the wound had almost healed itself shut! She stroked the little phoenix and said, "Thank you so much. If you can, go help Harry."

... -- ...

Riddle had nearly reached the door by the time that Flitwick and Michelle had finished the last of their Death Eaters. Michelle suggested, "Let's go around the house and get them in a cross fire."

Flitwick replied, "I always believed that experience would temper your persistent death wish, Miss Wood, but I see that's not the case."

She hissed, "I *don't* have a death wish, Professor. Doing *nothing* is a death wish. I'll go left, you go right. Cast an illumination flare when you get around your corner of the back and I'll try and hit Lestrangle."

Flitwick didn't have a better idea and he said, "Go." They scrambled out the door and silently made their war around the house.

... -- ...

In the mean while, Riddle and Bella were no more than a dozen feet away from the door. They were double-teaming against Susan, blasting the remains of the table that she was hiding behind.

Using both wands, Harry double-fired *Reducto* blasts that tagged Riddle, hitting his left arm below the elbow.

Bella went berserk and rapid fired a half-dozen blasts in Harry's direction, shrieking, "*Why won't you die, Potter?*"

Harry shouted back, "The Prophecy said, it wouldn't work that way, you skanky witch."

He double-fired another set of *Reductos* at Riddle hitting him higher up on his blown away arm.

Riddle's plan began to work against him. He had cast a wide area anti-apparition ward around the house for at least a hundred yards in either direction. He needed to leave and it would take at least a minute to take it down. He didn't have that minute.

Suddenly the sky lit up and he saw two *Reducto* blasts fly near Bella. She dodged both of them, but not the ones that Potter had fired. They hit her in the back, at the base of her neck. Her body spun around as her head twisted off and fell to the ground, landing on the stone patio with a soft thud.

Riddle was enraged. He stood and shouted, "*Die, Potter!*" He charged the house; firing curse after curse. He squarely hit Harry with one of

Dolohov's flame cutter curses and was shocked when Harry somehow remained standing! He fired an immensely powerful blasting spell at Harry, certain that this time he would finish the teen for good.

Susan cast her strongest shield, and Riddle's curse deflected back almost hitting him. Surprised at what he saw, he momentarily turned his attention to her. It was the break that Harry needed. He threw a plate into the air and hit it with a *Reducto* blast when it was near Riddle. Most of the pieces blew sideways, but a fair number hit him in the face, blinding him. Riddle turned to leave as Harry cast using both wands with one hand. Riddle put up a shield, but the power of the combined *Reducto* blast easily overpowered it, and Riddle's right arm severed, halfway above the elbow. His wand clattered to the floor as the evil wizard staggered out of the house. Harry collapsed from the effort and Susan rushed over to him.

Flitwick and Michelle watched frozen in horror as Riddle turned into his animagus form of a snake. Before it dawned on them to stop him, he had slithered away into the night.

... -- ...

Amelia heard the noise subside, then heard Michelle and Flitwick calling for Harry and Susan. Her heart sank when they didn't immediately answer. Finally Susan said, "We're in the kitchen, Harry's hurt."

Amelia found her cell phone and called in the attack, but she didn't have the strength to get up, so she waited.

... -- ...

Michelle raced in the house while Flitwick followed the path that he thought the Riddle-snake might have taken. Casting his strongest luminous spell, he could see streaks of blood where the snake had slithered though the grass over to the edge of what Flitwick recognized as an anti-apparition field. He cast several spells before bringing down the charm that Voldemort had used.

Inside, Michelle called, "Susan, Harry?"

Susan replied, "We're back here, Michelle."

Flitwick said, "I'll go get Poppy. Hang on."

Pop, pop, pop, pop. The ministry response team appeared. They charged in what had been the front door with their wands out, ready for anything. Amelia saw them and in a weak voice said, "Stand down, Aurors. The main fight is over. There are dead or wounded Death Eaters and dementors all over. Use caution and bind up any wounded that you see. Someone bring a mediwitch or two. Where is Connie?"

"Here. Anna, too. How can we help?"

"First, please find Susan and Harry. Make sure they're okay. Then have the Aurors secure the perimeter. There were over a hundred dementors here fifteen minutes ago. Voldemort, Bellatrix Lestrange and a handful of other Death Eaters were here too. Keep the gawkers away. I don't want this in the morning paper."

Connie nodded and replied, "That might be easier than usual. There were a number of other attacks about the same time as yours."

In a weak voice, Amelia asked, "Who?"

Connie said, "There was a report of a dementor attack at the Abbotts fifteen minutes ago. Hannah told the investigator that there were over fifty and she said that she drove them away by herself. I'm sure that she was confused, but Ben was almost kissed. Somehow they got away and the three of them made it to St. Mungo's. I don't have any updates on their condition."

Amelia nodded, grateful that the Abbotts were alive, but apprehensive since Connie's style was to report the good news first. She asked "Where else?"

Connie said, "There were two other attacks. The first was at Hermione Granger's parent's home. It was a bloodbath, but the Grangers weren't hurt."

Amelia nodded, urging her to continue.

She continued, "Things went pear shaped at Minister Scrimgeour's. Cellia, Jennifer and her husband Oliver were killed. One of the Death Eaters tried to drown their new baby. Rufus fought them off and grabbed the baby out of the pool. He took her to St Mungo's, but I don't have any other information."

Connie looked around a bit more, noticed a horrible smell. She looked over and saw the exploded remains of a great snake, and began to gag.

Two mediwitches came over and asked, "What happened, Director?"

Amelia said, "I was bit by that snake over there. It was the same one that attacked Arthur Weasley last year, if that helps. Harry Potter's phoenix splashed the wound with a flood of phoenix tears and I've recovered somewhat."

... -- ...

Connie went into what was left of the kitchen. Poppy Pomfrey had arrived and was tending to Harry and Susan. Susan saw her and gave a small smile. Harry had his top off. There was a red mark across his abdomen, but the skin wasn't broken. She walked back to Amelia and said, "Healer Pomfrey is with them. Susan looks fine. Harry has some injuries, but they don't look life threatening."

Amelia nodded and the two mediwitches transported her to St. Mungo's for observation.

Connie and Anna began their investigation. As was their routine, Connie took the photos and Anna recorded the events in their logbook.

Anna's summary read:

Bones estate – Death Eater attack – Voldemort present - 9 August

Time of attack – 10:15 –10:30 p.m.

Residents:

Amelia Bones

Susan Bones

Harry Potter

Other guests:

Michelle Wood

Fillius Flitwick

Description:

Combined attack from estimated 150 dementors, 5 Death Eaters and Voldemort. Estimated 140 dementors killed based on residual evidence. All known Death Eaters were killed. Voldemort escaped. Assailants included:

Bellatrix Lestrange (K) - Potter

Jacob Redman (K) - Flitwick

Robert Reynolds (K) - Flitwick

Ben Hedges (K) – A. Bones

Linn Myers (K) - Wood

Also found on the scene were an eleven foot snake of unknown species and three parts of two arms said to belong to Voldemort. One was a wrist bonded to a magically crafted artificial left hand. Second was elbow and bicep of what appears to be the same arm. Third part was a mostly intact right arm of same person based upon appearance and attached clothing.

Lestrange and other Death Eaters all had the Dark Mark on their left inner forearm. Each had carried two or more wands with them. Most appeared to be of identical manufacture. All wands including the wand believed to have been used by Voldemort were bagged and tagged.

... -- ...

When they finished outside, Connie checked in on Susan and Harry. Poppy had moved Harry up to his bedroom, which she took as a good sign. Flitwick was still there and asked if she had enough photos and other evidence bagged so he could begin the slow process of helping to put their home back in order.

Connie replied, "We do, and thank you for asking. What happened out back?"

Flitwick replied, "We were visiting in the kitchen when the attack began. Harry sensed that something was wrong and somehow managed to get Michelle back into the house. I was in the front with Amelia and after a few minutes Michelle joined us. A hoard of dementors swooped in. Harry cast several Patronus charms that chased them around a bit, then somehow he cast two that killed all but a handful of them! I have no idea how he did it."

She nodded and Anna wrote furiously in her logbook. Connie asked, "Then what happened?"

"Michelle and I went around the house to see if we could flank the Death Eaters attacking Harry and Susan. I cast a flair charm to illuminate the area. I saw Harry blow Lestranger's head off and begin to systematically dismember Voldemort! He hit him at least three, possibly four times taking both arms off. Voldemort must have had a snake animagus form, as he transformed and slithered off into the night. I saw blood streaks when I searched the grounds, but I didn't find him. I confess that, when I sensed the edge of the anti-apparition area, I stopped the search. I dropped the wards and you arrived seconds later."

Connie asked, "Do you think he's dead?"

Flitwick replied, "I don't believe so."

Connie, replied, "Thank you, Professor. We'll be in touch. Anna, we need to get back to the other sites. It will be a long night."

... -- ...

Saturday 10 August

Harry woke up late the following morning. Before he opened his eyes, he could feel that he ached all over. He recalled Michelle crashing into him, rolling on the floor dodging spells, and getting hit with the flame cutter spell. He recalled the near misses with the killing curses and explosive hexes as he'd traded shots with Voldemort the night before. He recalled Susan's shield, which reflected a horribly powerful hex that would have greatly injured him at the least. He recalled hitting back, dismembering Riddle bit by bit.

Deciding to sleep a bit more, he rolled over and nuzzled his face into his pillow. He took a breath and realized that his pillow had the clean smell of vanilla. He opened one eye and realized that he wasn't nuzzling his pillow, rather the two loveliest sights that had ever greeted him in the morning!

"Morning," she said softly to him as she stared into his beautiful eyes.

He stared back and replied, "Hi."

He heard the sweetest words that he could imagine as she said, "I love you so much, Harry."

He brushed her cheek with his forefinger and replied, "I love you too, Susan." She saw his eyes divert downward, hungrily, and shifted herself up to give him better access. Within seconds he was certain that she was his favorite flavor.

Far too soon she said, "We need to get up."

Harry murmured, "I'm still hungry."

She smiled and replied, "Me too, but we need to get breakfast and go see how Auntie is doing." She slid off the bed and he appreciated how well her jeans fit her and his eyes drank in her lovely curves as she put on her cotton bra and top. "Take a shower and I'll meet you down stairs in ten minutes."

... -- ...

At nine that morning, Dan, Emma and Hermione checked out of the hotel that they had stayed in the previous evening and drove home. They pulled in their driveway and were met by Randi who had just arrived. The workers had finished cleaning up their home. They had done a masterful job at restoring the interior and had completely repaired the damage to the roofline.

Emma and Dan had discussed the certainty that they would need to contact their solicitor to represent them in the hearing that was sure to take place within the next few days. Randi greeted them, "Good morning, Hermione. Good morning, Dr. and Dr. Granger. My name is Randi Estling, and I'm from the Ministry of Magic Department of Magical Law Enforcement. I have some documents for you." She handed an official looking envelope to Dan, one to Emma and one to Hermione.

Dan replied apprehensively, "Should we contact our solicitor about this?"

Randi wasn't certain of their concern and replied, "No, Sir. I believe everything is settled unless your home needs additional repair. Perhaps you would care to open your envelope, Dr. Granger."

Dan opened his envelope. It was a certified bank draft in the amount of 250,000 pounds sterling payable to him! To say that he was surprised would be a gross understatement. He said, "Open yours, Emma."

She did and it was identical, except that hers was made out in the amount of 500,000 pounds, sterling! The memo line indicated *Bounty Disbursement – Dolohov, Carrow*.

Hermione had a Gringotts draft in her envelope for 50,000 galleons payable to her. She looked at it and a sad smile found its way to her face. She said, "Thank you, Randi. Were there other attacks last night?"

Randi replied, "Unfortunately, yes. Minister Scrimgeour's family was murdered last night. Fortunately, he was able to save his baby granddaughter. There was a dementor attack at the Abbots. Miraculously, a phoenix appeared, and somehow Hannah was able to

drive the dementors away. There also was a serious attack at Director Bones' residence. I don't have any of the details about that, however. Is there anything else that you need, Hermione?"

Hermione didn't know what to say. She felt that she needed to stay with her parents for the day, but desperately wanted to go check on Harry and Susan. Family loyalty won out and she decided that she'd check on them later.

... -- ...

Michelle, Susan, and Harry were fireflashd to St. Mungo's at 9:30. The happy little phoenix sang softly as they walked down the hallway lifting the spirits of everyone who heard her sing.

Michelle was a few steps ahead of Harry and Susan when she saw Rufus carrying her niece. Her eyes lit up at the site of baby Lisa. She called, "Good morning, Minister. How are...?" She saw the sadness of loss in his eyes and asked, "What happened?"

He replied, "We were attacked at our home last night. Oliver, Jennifer, and Cellia were murdered. I was able to stop McNair, Avery, and Rabastan Lestrangle. Rookwood threw little Lisa in the swimming pool to drown her and got away. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you about your brother, Michelle."

She reached up to hug him, and a sob slipped from her.

Realization hit Harry, and he understood that the Oliver in question was his former Quidditch Captain. Piecing the rest together as quickly as any clueless teen male could, he gathered that Lisa was his baby daughter, and the other two women that Scrimgeour mentioned were probably his wife and daughter. Susan, who was much quicker in those things, had already joined in the hug. He walked over to join them.

Head Healer Crabtree and Renee saw them walking in the hallway, heard the little phoenix, and walked over. Renee recognized Susan and smiled. Crabtree saw her and said, "Good morning, Miss Bones. Your Aunt is in room six."

Scrimgeour hadn't heard about the attack and asked, "What happened?"

Susan replied, "Voldemort, a bunch of Death Eaters and a hoard of dementors attacked us. Harry killed the dementors, Bellatrix, and took Voldemort apart. Michelle, Auntie and Professor Flitwick got the rest of the Death Eaters and Voldemort's horrible snake. The snake bit Auntie."

Harry and Michelle were silent. Susan's statement was accurate enough.

Scrimgeour begrudgingly shifted from grieving grandpa mode to minister of magic. He looked at Michelle who said, "I'll hold her for you."

... -- ...

McGonagall looked over the old scribe's report with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction. There was always loss in war, but it seemed that far too frequently, her Gryffindors, who had recently finished school, were among those who'd found the cost of freedom.

It had been a summer unlike any that she could recall with respect to the changes in so many people's lives. She realized that of the students who had been in her fifth year classes the term before; she would never see most of the Slytherins again, except in a courtroom; never speak to Longbottom again, except in the long term care ward, and never owed so much to so few.

... -- ...

Chapter Twenty Two – Picking up the Pieces

Ben Abbott woke up about the time that Michelle and Scrimgeour were in their group hug. He had the worst headache that he could imagine, but he was alive. Becky was sitting by his side and saw his eyes flutter. She could see a look of recognition in his eyes and her heart leapt with joy. She hugged the love of her life with all of her might; kissing him like it was a lost opportunity that had, miraculously, been recovered.

Hannah was curled up sleeping in the chair next to hers. He looked at her and said, “She saved us, didn’t she?”

Becky nodded and in a soft voice replied, “She called Harry’s little phoenix and cast two patronus charms that drove them all away. You weren’t breathing and the little phoenix flew us here last night. I heard the mediwitches talking; there were other attacks.”

Ben asked, “Who?”

She replied, “I don’t know, but I’ll tell the healer that you’re awake and go find a newspaper.”

... -- ...

Hannah woke up a few minutes later. She looked around for a few minutes until she remembered where she was, then saw her Dad sitting up in bed. She zoomed over to him and gave him a fierce hug. With tears of joy in her eyes, she said, “I love you, Daddy. I was so scared.”

He replied, “I love you too, Hannah. Thank you for saving us.”

“Thank you indeed,” came the unwelcome voice of Rita Skeeter. “Chief Abbott, do you have any comment to make regarding the three attacks last night?”

“I haven’t been briefed on the details,” replied Ben, who was still feeling his way among the press people.

“Do you think there is a correlation between Death Eater attacks being up 200 percent and Scrimgeour’s bounty program?”

“No. I think Death Eater attacks are up because Voldemort has launched an offensive. I wasn’t in favor of the bounty program when he initiated it. However, at this point, I think it should be doubled, and expanded to include dementors, but we know of no way to stop them.”

“Chief Abbott, there are unconfirmed rumors that the dementors may have launched two attacks last night. Was one of the attacks aimed at your family?”

Ben replied, “Yes. My daughter Hannah was able to cast a *Patronus* charm and drive quite a number of them away from our home.”

Head Healer Crabtree walked in the room, saw the eternally unwelcome reporter there, and yelled, “Out, Skeeter. You know the rules. No lurking around the patient hallways. You will *confine* yourself to the visitor level. Out you go!”

... -- ...

Harry and Susan were sitting in Amelia’s room. She was not seriously injured from the snakebite, but the healers had insisted that she rest for the day. Given the size of the snake that had bit her, they were initially amazed that she was alive. Minister Scrimgeour had stopped by to see them, but had his own losses to worry about. He asked that they stop by his office on Monday morning and avoid talking with the press as much as possible in the meanwhile. They were more than happy to comply.

The funerals for Scrimgeour’s family and Oliver would be the next afternoon. Michelle had understood when Susan had hugged her and told her that Minister Scrimgeour had recommended that they not attend.

At four, the Healer requested that Amelia stay the evening and advised her that she would be released the next morning. Susan offered to bring her things over so she would be ready to come home on Sunday morning.

After they returned a few minutes later Amelia suggested, "You two should go now. I'll be back in the morning, in time for a late breakfast."

Susan hugged her and said, "We love you, Auntie."

She replied, "I love you too, Dears. Go home and stay inside. Connie and Anna will stop by for dinner. Michelle will be back Monday."

... -- ...

Molly was cried out. It had been three days since Ron had been abducted. Most of the people who might have had knowledge regarding his whereabouts were dead. Lisa Rosier hadn't been seen since leaving the courtroom. Arthur had just learned that He who-must-not-be-named had attacked the Bones Friday evening, but none of the details had been announced.

Moody had stopped by to visit them on Friday evening about the time of the attacks, but he hadn't been able to learn anything more than the others. Lisa Rosier had finished school that spring and hadn't been seen by anyone until the day of the trial.

... -- ...

Connie and Anna arrived at six. Harry had come to like the two investigators on a personal basis. It was the circumstances that he kept seeing them on that were so horrific. Anna brought a bottle of wine and Smidgen made them a large pepperoni pizza and salad. Anna was completely different in appearance than Connie, who resembled someone's Aunt Edna. Thirty years, five inches and fifty pounds separated the two, yet as an investigative team, they were perfectly matched. Both had a good eye for detail, both were easy to talk with and good listeners and were highly competent. Finally, for better or worse, both seemed to be married to their careers. At some level, their differences complemented each other. Connie was steeped in the pure blood conservative tradition and would have been comfortable lunching with the likes of Augusta Longbottom or Narcissa Malfoy. She had an appreciation for the value of British tradition and position. Anna was much more forward looking in her outlook. For that reason, she held a fascination for Harry, Susan, and Hermione,

who she saw as the leaders of British Wizardry in the next twenty years. She expected to see the wizarding world embrace technology, and was eager to retire owls and parchment, and replace them with cell phones and e-mail.

At dinner, they slipped into their easy banter, each respecting each other's positions, and didn't really try to change them. Anna asked, "Susan, what are you planning on studying in school this term?"

She considered her answer for a moment and replied, "A month ago, Hannah asked me, and I told her, Herbology, Potions, Charms, Transfiguration and Arithmancy. Now I'm not so sure."

Anna nodded, and asked "Harry, how about you?"

Harry pulled the schedule that Flitwick had given him and said, "I have individual classes in the afternoons and evenings. Here is my schedule." Anna looked at it and read;

Monday – transfiguration

Tuesday – hit-wizard level defense and healing after dinner

Wednesday – charms and estate management

Thursday – defense and healing after dinner

Friday – defense and field trips

Saturday – Wizengamot in the mornings, free time in the afternoons

Sunday – free time

Anna asked, "When are you going to learn about technology?"

Harry asked, "What do you mean?"

Anna replied, "I'll give you two examples. Neville Longbottom will most likely spend the rest of his life in St. Mungo's because he didn't recognize that a breach loaded shotgun needed to be reloaded before it could fire again. Apparently Dolohov didn't either, but it was the last lesson that he ever learned. Your friend, Hermione's father

called me on my cell phone as they were being attacked. As a result, we could respond within seconds. Just imagine the results if she had been forced to owl. 500 years ago sending an owl was instant communication and provided a witch or wizard a real advantage over a nonmagical person in business or battle. Now it's quaint. My point is; what are you two going to want your own children to learn someday? Mr. Potter, you have the means and the opportunity to receive a one-of-a-kind education. Susan, you do too, if you grab it. When I was at Hogwarts, muggle studies spoke of the colonist's revolution as if it belonged on the current events page. In Professor Dumbledore's lifetime, he saw the development of the telegraph, trains, steamliners, bi-planes, jumpjets, lightbulbs, computers and cell phones. Your friend Neville's home didn't have electricity. Instead it had the old gas lights. Contrast that with Dr. Granger's home, which has two personal computers and even a dedicated connection to the internet. No disrespect intended, but which of them were better equipped to become the leaders of the next age?"

Connie nodded and added, "Yet at the same time, it's worthwhile to remember that we British are as conservative as they come. The wizarding population is, on average, a generation or so older than the non-magical folk, simply because, on average, we live sixty or seventy years longer; at least if we weren't so obsessed with killing each other off. God willing, Mr. Potter, you and Susan will likely see Halley's comet three times in your lives. That blasting spell that you so ably used was invented a few years before Johann Gutenberg developed the moveable type printing press, yet both of you would agree that knowledge of it is still relevant. The fact that it was developed to aid in coal mining is immaterial."

Anna looked at her watch, winked at Susan and said, "It's getting late, Connie. We need to trudge off and these two need to tuck each other in for the night."

In truth, Susan had exactly those ideas and replied, "Thank you both for coming over."

A few minutes later, they had left and Susan commanded, "Upstairs, Potter."

... -- ...

As Harry and Susan finally had an evening to themselves and were taking advantage of the opportunity to learn more about the joys of young love, an asp slowly slithered into the woods a few miles from their home. It had been badly injured recently, and, in a survival mode, slithered inside a rotted out stump, and began an early hibernation to slowly heal itself.

... -- ...

Ginny was as angry as a fifteen-year-old witch could be. Last summer she had been forced to endure being locked out of dozens of Order meetings where they plotted on how to save the world. Now her idiot brother had gotten himself stolen and there was no Order left to go out and find him.

Worse yet, Hermione was busy every day, and she had no one other than Luna to talk with. Her parents just sat around and cried; maybe the twins could think something up.

... -- ...

Remus had missed the trial, having been out trying to meet with some of the other werewolf wizards who might be convinced to remain neutral to join the light side. Voldemort had heavily recruited them with some success. Most notably, he had obtained the support of Fenrir Greyback, the mean wizard who had bitten Lupin when he was seven.

Remus arrived back at his home the evening of the dementor attacks and decided to look over the *Daily Prophet* headlines for the last ten days.

Harry Potter Assumes Family Position in Wizengamot – One of the oldest seats is rightfully manned again.

Hermione Granger, Muggleborn Schoolgirl Handed Wizengamot Seat – New blood or a loss of tradition?

Death Eaters Launch Massive Escape – Is no place safe?

Harry Potter Survives Killing Curse Again! – The chosen one or something more?

Voldemort Blooded by Harry Potter! – Score one for the chosen one!

Peter Pettigrew a Death Eater! – How much did Fudge know and when did he know it?

Scrimgeour Defends Bounty Program – The results have been remarkable!

No Trace of Abducted Weasley Teen – None of Voldemort's other victims ever escaped.

Dementors Attack Chief Abbott – Saved by Patronus taught to daughter by Harry Potter!

Minister Scrimgeour Defends Granddaughter from Death Eater Attack – The rest of his family was slaughtered.

Parents of Muggleborn Witch Stop Death Eater Attack – Death Eaters meet their match!

Remus set the old issues aside and picked up the current issue. He muttered to himself, "May we live in interesting times, indeed." A letter to the editor caught his attention.

Letter to the Editor,

Four of the last five Hogwarts Defense instructors have been utter failures. Now, more than ever, Headmaster Flitwick, with thoughtful guidance from the Board of School Governors, needs to ensure that the defense education offered our children is of a practical and useful nature. The practical aspect will need to focus on what to do in a bad situation and practice those exercises until they are second nature. The useful aspect needs to focus on the most likely threats. If we stay out of large lakes, we will most likely not encounter a grindylow. Let's put those risks aside. Our children are being slaughtered in their homes, on the street, in restaurants, in public buildings – places that we deem safe. The curriculum needs to focus on staying safe and reacting to bad situations. If the OWL or NEWT exams need to be

adjusted to reflect the change, so be it. I implore Headmaster Flitwick to please find an expert who can transfer the practical knowledge and skills to our children, not another hack.

Respectfully submitted,

Lorraine Wood

Grieving parent

Lupin put the paper down. Her words stung, but he could see the truth in them. He hoped Flitwick had found a wider pool of talent to select from what Dumbledore had used.

... -- ...

Harry, Amelia, and Susan were ushered into Scrimgeour's office at 7 a.m. on Monday.

Amelia said, "We were all so sorry to hear of your loss, Rufus. Cellia was a good woman and a personal friend. The wizarding world will be a lesser place without her spark. Jennifer and Oliver were a beautiful young couple. They had so much to look forward to." Seeing no response she asked, "How is little Lisa?"

Scrimgeour who'd seemed introspective while Amelia had been speaking lit up at the mention of his granddaughter. In fact, it seemed like she was all that he had to live for at the moment.

He replied, "She's fine. The Healers wanted to keep her another day for observation. She'll be fine.

There was a soft knock on the door and Scrimgeour's assistant announced, "Minister, Mr. Croaker has arrived."

Scrimgeour replied, "Send him in."

A frail looking man walked slowly into the room. Harry thought he resembled a human pickle, he was so shriveled, but Amelia suddenly seemed almost reverent. She stood and said, "Good morning, Professor Croaker."

He smiled back and replied, "Good morning, Amelia. I see you brought some other interesting companions to share a cuppa with." He extended a withered looking hand and said, "I'm Alejandro Croaker."

Harry and Susan both stood. Susan replied first, "I'm Susan Bones, Professor. This is Harry Potter."

Harry reached his hand out and was surprised. Croaker's grip was surprisingly firm. Harry said, "I'm please to meet you, Sir."

Croaker replied, "No more than I am to finally see you again, Harry Potter. Please call me Al. It has been nearly fifteen years since I last laid eyes on you. Your parents would doubtless be very proud of the man that you have become." Seeing the food on the table, he continued, "But let us enjoy this wonderful food while we have our discussions."

They sat and Harry soon learned that a breakfast meeting had little to do with the actual consumption of breakfast.

Croaker began, "If I am to believe the reports, Harry, you have done three truly remarkable things in the last week. Starting with the comparatively mundane, how did you manage to dismember Tom Riddle?"

Harry was surprised at two levels; one that the man he was having breakfast with didn't use the hyphenated name business, secondly that he knew Voldemort's real name. He replied, "I have learned how to cast spells with two wands at the same time."

Scrimgeour looked amazed, but Croaker just nodded. What Harry was describing was certainly a rare gift, but it was not unheard of. He observed, "That and your father's quick reflexes would make a very lethal combination. It makes sense. Thank you for explaining it. When did you learn that you could simultaneously cast spells?"

Harry replied, "Just last month."

Croaker nodded and replied, "It is a skill that is well worth developing, but not one that you should advertise. It will provide you a true

advantage against those who would battle against you. Remember that the dead tell no tales.”

Harry nodded and tried to get a bite in before Mr. Croaker’s next question. Susan was watching her boyfriend try to get a gulp of juice down as Croaker asked, “Is it true that you were hit by a killing curse from Bellatrix Lestrange last week?”

Harry nodded and replied, “Yes, but I was wearing a good set of body armor.”

He nodded and inquired, “Harry, have any of your instructors discussed the theory of a witch or wizard’s raw power before?”

Harry replied, “Do you mean the idea that some wizards are more powerful or more skilled than others. Yes, I mean no. Michelle Wood explained it to Susan and me last month. The teachers never mentioned it.”

Croaker nodded and replied, “They probably didn’t want to bruise anyone’s ego. To fully understand the concept, you need to discriminate between raw power and finesse with a specific spell. Additionally, have you considered that some wands work better than others?”

This time Harry replied, “Yes. Mr. Ollivander showed us how to make wands and talked about different cores. I made this one.”

Croaker looked at Harry’s wand and gave him a clever look. He handed it back and said, “Good work, Harry. You should consider making a few more like that one and saving them. Back to topic. If you were to rank an adult witch’s raw casting ability on a scale of one through five with the idea that a normal witch had a power of three and a near squib had a power of one, you might understand the range of raw power. For every step up or down, use a factor of 50 percent. In other words, a level-two witch might possess half as much raw power as a level-three, and a level-one might possess only a fourth. On the other side, a level-five witch might possess two and a quarter times more power than an average level-three witch. So far so good?”

Harry and Susan both nodded.

Croaker continued, "Take the same theory and apply it to a spell that you know how to cast. Once you understand the basics of that spell, with sufficient practice you can get better at casting that specific spell."

Harry replied, "So if a person practiced and practiced the killing curse they would produce a stronger curse?"

Croaker nodded and answered, "Unfortunately that is true. Now you say that you know something about wands. What did Ollivander tell you about different cores?"

Harry replied, "He told me that some cores inherently contain a bit more magic than others. He told us that dragon heartstring is used in most wands, not because it works the best, rather because it is available in the greatest quantity."

Croaker nodded, and observed, "He is doubtless correct and you know more about cores than 95 percent of the wizarding world. What did he tell you about casings?"

"He told us that different casings were a better match to individual witches or wizards and different lengths were more or less useful depending on what you wanted to do with the wand. He told us that different diameters were needed for balance and also based on the size of the channel cut into the wand to accommodate different cores."

Croaker nodded in admiration and remarked, "You seem to have an aptitude and an interest in this subject, Harry. Hopefully Ollivander will be willing to share a bit more of his wealth of practical experience with you in the future. Back to topic, apply the same scale to the power of the core and overall fit of the wand to the witch. In other words, if you compared a wand with a powerful core that truly fit a witch you would likely get double the results than one from a generic birch casing heartstring wand."

Harry nodded, feeling like he understood what the old wizard was saying, but not understanding his point.

“Where I was going with all of this Harry, is that if you take a powerful witch who has the best possible wand and casts a spell that she has truly mastered, you would see vastly better results than the mundane. A factor of five to as much as ten times is theoretically possible. If you were to compare your friends from school, Ginny Weasley and Hermione Granger; they both might possess the same level of raw power. Miss Granger might practice her spells over and over, and take the time to learn everything about them that she can. As a result, her stunner might be a bit more powerful than Ginny’s. If by chance her wand was not a perfect fit and Ginny’s was, the difference in finesse might be negated by the ineffectiveness of the equipment.”

Harry promised himself that he would never accuse McGonagall of being long-winded again.

“So circling all of this back to killing curses and armor, the best possible set of armor might be sufficient to absorb a killing curse cast by a mundane witch using an average wand, though I certainly would be unwilling to flutter my remaining months on such a theory. No one would consider Bellatrix Lestrange to be mundane either in overall casting ability or finesse with that particular curse; likewise with Tom Riddle.”

Harry pleaded, “I think my mother must have cast some sort of charm on me right before she died.” He really didn’t want to be different in yet another way.

Croaker replied, “Indeed she probably did. I taught it to her when you were born. She worked with me for a few years after she finished school. She had a brilliant mind and was a warm and charming young woman. Back to task, the effectiveness of that charm cast by a powerful witch like Lily who had practiced the spell might be roughly equivalent to the rather remarkable set of ironbelly body armor that my granddaughter made for you. The reality is that you somehow possess a high degree of natural resiliency to that particular curse. It is possible that your father possessed it and passed it to you. My belief is; had he been wearing good armor that night, it is possible that he might have survived the attack. You possess more experience with Tom Riddle than I, and can form your theory about his current level of raw skill and finesse. It is regrettable that his wand was

snapped and burned as quickly as it had been.” He gave Scrimgeour an annoyed look.

Harry replied, “It was a phoenix feather from Fawkes. He was about fifty years old when the feather was given. It was the brother wand to my first wand.”

“They might have been level four wands,” remarked Croaker.

Harry nodded and suggested, “So I should give my armor to someone else?”

“No!” shouted, Amelia, Susan, and Scrimgeour all at once.

Croaker smiled a withered smile and observed, “Harry, you have an extraordinarily natural resiliency to one spell – the killing curse. You would be just as susceptible to a knife wound, a bullet or a *Reducto* hex as your friend Susan, or any of us. Keep your armor, and wear it as much as you can stand. Obviously there is no place that is completely safe.”

Harry nodded and tried a quick bite of his food. It was stone cold. Croaker gave him a smile and said; “If you allow me my last questions, I will happily buy you and Susan a lovely lunch at a more private location where no one will grill you incessantly.”

Susan took Harry’s fork out of his hand and said, “Agreed. What else?”

Croaker chuckled and said, “There have been reports of dementors at least as long as Hogwarts has been in existence, and possibly longer. However, there have been no reports of one dying on its own, if such a thing was possible, and certainly no reports of someone succeeding in intentionally killing one. The wizarding world in Britain only gained a measure of safety around four hundred years ago when some brilliant witch or wizard somehow succeeded in convincing them to guard Azkaban. Yet, antidotally, you managed to kill over a hundred and forty of them within a few minutes.”

Harry replied, “Perhaps it would be best if I showed you. Amelia brought my pensieve and you can see for yourself.”

Harry and Amelia each deposited their memory of the attack into Harry's pensieve and Croaker tapped the rune. Scrimgeour, Amelia, and Croaker went in for Harry's memory. It wasn't long; not more than a few minutes later that they came out. They had experienced the same memory, but had each observed and felt different things.

Scrimgeour the ex-Auror, observed, "You hit him three times. You *really do* have the power to destroy him! Your *Reducto* blast on Bellatrix was inspired. The idea of hitting him with the plate shards was brilliant. I hope you managed to keep him down for a few weeks as we continue to gear up. Susan, that was an amazing shield that you cast. You two work very well together."

Croaker observed, "That was far and away the two most powerful spells that I have ever seen cast. The forms looked to be completely solid. Brilliant! It appeared like you tried to say something to the few that were leaving."

Harry replied, "I did. They can understand parseltongue. I told them to go back to Azkaban or I would hunt them down."

Parseltongue wasn't a part of Scrimgeour's meat and potato style thinking. Potter had somehow managed to blast a bunch of the dementors, and he would happily pay him for his efforts. Even Abbott had finally come around to his line of thinking.

Amelia was silent, but had felt the love that Harry had for Susan. She walked over and hugged him.

It was time to see her memory. This time Harry and Susan went in with the others and she sat out. He felt Amelia's love for Susan and him. He finally realized that he had a home and would do anything to protect the two witches who loved him.

He felt something strangely familiar when Amelia had blasted the snake. He couldn't place the odd sensation, but he had felt it before.

They broke for a minute as Scrimgeour went back to his office to write Harry yet another Gringotts draft.

Croaker collected his thoughts. His last five years of study hadn't been as enlightening as the morning had been. He had a million questions for the teen, but realized that he had no claim or hold on Harry's time.

... -- ...

As breakfast wound down, Harry asked, "What about Ron?"

Scrimgeour glanced at Amelia for a moment. She replied, "There is no news of him, Harry. There have been no demands made, no sightings, no body had been found, and no Death Eaters have been captured alive who might have information about him. He was taken by Lisa Rosier and Antonin Dolohov at the trial. Rosier hasn't been seen since and Dolohov was killed in the attack at the Grangers."

Harry inquired, "Has anyone tried sending him an owl?"

Amelia replied, "I had asked Bob Sunset to go visit the Weasleys on Friday afternoon. Your friend Ron owns a little owl. He placed a tracking charm on the owl and put a note on it to give to Ron. It flew around aimlessly for two hours until it was attacked by a blue jay. Sunset managed to rescue it and sent it back home. He tried again yesterday and had no better luck. Apparently Molly has a family clock. Ron's hand is listed at mortal peril."

Harry asked, "What if I offered a reward and placed a listing in the *Daily Prophet*?"

Amelia glanced at Scrimgeour who shook his head and explained, "Harry, that would be the worst possible thing to do. Abductions are fairly rare in the wizarding world after the Wizengamot outlawed the payment of ransoms in 1841. Prior to that they had been a weekly occurrence, as it is so easy for one witch or wizard to stun another and side-along apparate them away. I would ask you not to circumvent the law in this matter. If they wanted him dead, he would have been dead before they left the building. We'll just have to wait."

... -- ...

Sixty-two of their order met on the hills near Blackpool. The dark one had promised them much and had delivered nothing. In the millenium that they had been awake, only a handful of humans had spoken to them in the ancient language of the serpents that they understood. No one had directly commanded them. No one had directly threatened their existence, until three nights ago.

They had made a horrible decision to follow the dark one. Most of their order had ceased to exist as a result. As a group, they made the decision to begin the journey back to their island home as the powerful one had commanded and await their fate.

... -- ...

In Blackstone, Rookwood waited most of the morning for any of the others to arrive. A dozen others had come and gone during the day. None had seen the Dark Lord or had any real news. Some of their number had definitely been killed over the weekend. The *Daily Prophet* carried photos of Carrow, Mikken, Dolohov and Yaxley laid out in the Grangers back yard. The next day there were photos of Avery, McNair and Rabastan Lestrangle laid out in Scrimgeour's back garden. Unquestionably, their numbers were growing smaller. However Rookwood saw opportunity where others saw loss. He was now among the elders; those who were competent and had the resources to contribute in a real way. He was certain that the Dark Lord would return soon and bring the conservative values new prominence. He made certain that everyone received their pay envelopes and bid them to return on Friday evening.

The only other person living there who was present was Rosier's daughter. Rookwood amused himself as he reminisced about her birth nearly twenty years ago, the result of a fifth year teenage pregnancy. He found it ironic that of all the people in the world, it had been Junior Minister Cornelius Fudge who had taken her into his home, at the suggestion from Lucius Malfoy that it would help his public image on his way to the top of the command chain at the Ministry.

As an unspeakable, Rookwood had gained favor with many among the ministry, even after his arrest in 1981. After his escape from

Azkaban six months ago, he found that many doors were still open to him. He had made much of his money over the years by loaning out artifacts and antiquities and systematically losing the paperwork relating to them. It was several years after his arrest before anyone noticed that anything was gone. No one ever directly tied the belief that so many artifacts had disappeared to the thin Unspeakable.

... -- ...

Monday evening, Randi came around and delivered bounty checks to Amelia, Michelle and Harry. Susan asked her to stay a while, but the young witch told her that she needed to get to Hogwarts and deliver Professor Flitwick's before she went home. After she left, Susan suggested that they open their envelopes. Amelia received another Gringotts draft for 50,000 galleons. Michelle received a similar amount. Harry was astounded when he opened his envelope. There were two Gringotts drafts inside. The first was for 350,000 galleons! The memo line read *three hits on Voldemort & Bellatrix Lestrange*.

Harry set the envelope on the table and quickly walked to the bathroom. He ran cold water on splashed his face to keep from vomiting. A few minutes later Amelia gently knocked on the door, opened it and saw Harry sitting in the tile floor with his back against the wall. She left the water running and sat down next to him. His eyes had welled with tears. As softly as she could, Amelia said, "It's not fun to fight a battle, Harry. There's no joy in winning a duel to the death, but we get to live another day. We get to see those who we love. Don't be embarrassed by the gold, Harry, but don't be awed by it either. He'll have plenty left to help those who will need it."

Harry sat silent listening to the sound of her words. She continued, "The gold that you were awarded today won't bring Sirius back, but taking Lestrange down will keep her from ruining other lives. That is the essences of being an Auror, Harry; writing wrongs and finishing your shift so you can go home to your loved ones at the end of the day."

She saw him nod, so she stood up and held her hand out to help him up. As he took it, she said, "Susan needs you, Harry. Please go see that she's all right. Goodnight."

Feeling better than she had in a long time, Amelia sat in her favorite chair and read a novel.

... -- ...

Pomona Sprout read the *Daily Prophet* on Tuesday morning. Most of the story about the attack at Welshpool had finally been released. Scrimgeour had released photos of Bella's head, Redman, and the other three Death Eaters along with photos of the amazingly large pile of dementor cloaks stacked up like a hideously large laundry pile. There was a photo of Anna and Connie holding up one of the cloaks. It had to be over ten feet long!

She looked at it and exclaimed, "Good Lord, look at the size of that thing!" Like Minerva, she initially had her reservations regarding Flitwick's version of the events, but here was undeniable proof. Speaking of, Filius was coming down the stairs for breakfast.

Minerva, Poppy and Pomona greeted him, "Good morning."

He replied, "Good morning to you three as well." Worried that there may have been other attacks, Flitwick asked, "What's in the paper today?"

Poppy replied, "Primarily, you and Harry. Good Lord, Filius, You told us that there were *a number* of dementors there. You *never* mentioned that there were a hundred and fifty or that Harry managed to destroy all but *ten* of them!"

"It was rather chaotic," admitted the short statured genius.

Minerva handed him an envelope and said, "Randi Estling from Amelia's office brought this for you last evening when you were at Rosmerta's." She gave him an annoyed look clearly indicating disapproval at his penchant for visiting the busty barkeeper.

Flitwick opened the envelope took a look at the bank draft and fell off of his chair in shock. On the floor, he started laughing uncontrollably until Poppy and Minerva came over to help him up. "What is it?" asked Poppy.

Flitwick showed her the bank draft and quipped, "It works out to about 8 sickles for each one of the little ferret's insults when he didn't think I was listening."

The four of them had a good laugh at the joke and their friend's good fortune.

... -- ...

As Flitwick was on the floor laughing, Amelia was kissing the teens goodbye for the day. Susan said, "We're going to Gringotts in the morning, then visiting Fred and George Weasley's shop, then a bit of shopping, then lunch. We have practice with Michelle in the afternoon if she's ready."

Amelia replied, "Take care of each other. If you wouldn't mind, please stop by after lunch. Enjoy your morning."

... -- ...

Harry and Susan were fireflushed to the outside of the lobby at Gringotts. They went in and waited in the teller line.

Harry handed the teller the bank draft for the 350,000 galleons and said, "I'd like to put this in vault 3210 please."

Susan caught the number and said, "Harry, no. It's yours."

He kissed her and replied, "It's only a bit of gold. Please?"

She nodded and said, "Okay, but you have to put the other one in your vault."

"Huh?"

"There are *two* drafts, Harry. Here's the other... Merlin!"

The other draft was in the amount of one million, four hundred thousand galleons. Harry commented, "That won't fit."

Susan said, "Mine will be full too. How about the Potter trust vault?"

Harry shook his head and said, "I really don't have control of it yet. I don't want to put gold into it if I can't take it out. I'll use the Black family vault that Sirius left me." When they got to the head of the line again, Harry politely said, "May I speak with Whipcraack please?"

The goblin was about to make a rude remark, looked up and saw who it was and scurried off to find the head investment banker.

Whipcraack came by a few moments later and asked, "How may I help you Mr. Potter?"

Harry replied, "I would like to visit the Black family vault and deposit this bank draft into that vault please."

Whipcraack examined the draft and replied, "As you wish, Mr. Potter. Will Ms. Bones be joining you?"

Harry replied, "Yes, please."

Whipcraack personally took them in the cart. He enjoyed the diversion of the winding tracks from his everyday tasks almost as much as they were enjoying holding onto each other in the dark, winding tunnel. Finally they reached the vault and Whipcraack opened it. The vault itself was about the size of Harry's bedroom at Privet drive. It was almost empty, save for a wooden jewel case. Susan looked inside. It was filled with strands of pearls the size of marbles, overlarge diamond earrings and other jewelry that, while obviously valuable, was not to the teen's taste. Harry agreed thinking that most of the pieces would look right in place on Sybil Trawleney.

In a cardboard box was an old locket and old cup and a gaudy looking man's gold ring along with other knick-knacks that Harry had no interest in. Whipcraack suggested, "I could melt these down for you Mr. Potter if you don't want them. If you have no interest in the jewelry, I would be more than willing to have it sold on your behalf. Your friend, Mr. Lupin was very satisfied with our services."

"Please," replied Harry. "Where does the scrap metal get melted?"

A smile appeared on Whipcraack's face and he said, "Allow me to show you." He took them several levels deeper and stopped the cart.

Harry could feel the hot fires in the room and was obviously interested in the operation. Whipcrack saw the human's interest and explained, "This is the area where estate gold is melted down. Most of it is minted into sickles or galleons." He took the objects out of the box and weighed them, carefully writing down the amounts. Seconds later three of the pieces were on the little conveyer belt marked gold and the silver locket was on another marked silver. As the cup and the ring dropped into the molten metal vat, Harry felt that strange feeling again but couldn't place there he had originally felt it. Moments later, he had the same feeling again as the old locket liquefied into the silver vat. Whipcrack noticed Harry's odd look, and suggested that they get back into the carts. When they got back into the lobby, he handed them a ticket for twenty-six galleons and eleven sickles.

Harry nuzzled Susan's neck and joked, "Now I can afford to buy you a proper lunch."

... -- ...

McGonagall was not pleased. She put down the parchment that she had marked up and cleaned off her quill as a proper administrator would. Minutes later the old scribe had come in from clearing the snow from the front entrance. She launched into him, saying, "Mr. Crow, are these scenes really necessary?"

The old scribe looked at the marked up sections with some interest – *two most beautiful sights, Upstairs, Potter*. McGonagall looked on like a cat would look at a mouse that was cornered, but the old scribe refused her the satisfaction of a response. He simply picked up his coat and gloves and prepared to leave.

McGonagall tried a different tactic. "You have completely circumvented the major plot element of book six and the setup for book seven. Sitting in a cardboard box in a bank vault, all nice and neat. What's the sense?"

The old scribe nodded in unexpected agreement. They were a lame idea and he had gotten rid of the lot of them in less than three pages. Besides, only one eagle-eyed witch had noticed the earlier reference that he had made.

McGonagall went back to her work.

Crow went back to his desk hoping to see the latest installment from the master storyteller FullPensieve.

... -- ...

Chapter Twenty Three – The Azkaban Incident

Tuesday 13 August

As Harry and Susan were leaving Gringotts on their way to see Fred and George before lunch, Bob Sunset and the team of Aurors returned from Azkaban with some remarkable news. The remaining dementors truly had returned to the island fortress and were patrolling the now empty fortress as they had done for hundreds of years.

Amelia called Scrimgeour and Croaker to her office for a quick meeting. She explained what she thought had happened and told him that the dementors had returned.

Scrimgeour commented, "We either need to accept them, or pay Potter to destroy the lot of them."

Croaker observed "It would be difficult to do logistically. I'm not saying that he doesn't possess the power to destroy one, but last time they were in a closed area. The likelihood of getting the remaining dementors in a closed room with Potter is slim. If they knew that he had been charged with hunting them down, they might scatter into the wind and launch a horrendous killing spree."

"Perhaps," agreed Amelia, "but they seem to have a herding instinct of some type. I suspect if Riddle could have gotten them to disburse for a weeklong killing spree, he would have. There was no possible way that we could have defended against two hundred simultaneous attacks, and he would have known it."

Scrimgeour added, "They're an annoyance either way. As one of the American Presidents so bluntly put it, "Would you rather have them in your tent pissing outside or outside your tent pissing in?"

Amelia gave him a look worthy of McGonagall. She was hardly a prude, but there was no point in being crude. She remarked, "You're right of course. The wizarding public would hardly feel secure with them guarding our most dangerous prisoners after letting them all go last month. Dumbledore tried to get Fudge to replace them sixteen months ago, but he didn't have an alternative. Prior to Voldemort's organized efforts at trying to repatriate his prisoners of war, there has

been only one recorded case of an escape. We only have one Death Eater in custody. He could be kept elsewhere.”

“None,” corrected, Scrimgeour. “I sent Yaxley on a vacation to the other side of the veil this morning.”

“We’ll never acquire any information on the whereabouts of the Weasley boy if you keep that up,” admonished Bones.

“Weasley was collateral damage in a war; regrettable, but not unusual. The odds are, he’s already dead by now.” Scrimgeour’s words were blunt, but Amelia admitted that her former Head Auror was probably right.

“Do us all a favor, and don’t express that opinion in front of Harry,” suggested Amelia. “At one point, they were best friends.”

“All the more reason he’ll never see the light of day,” argued Scrimgeour. “Voldemort would get wind of the fact that he had someone close to Potter in his custody and most likely spend his evenings slowly torturing him just for the fun of it.” He hadn’t really thought about what he’d just said, and Amelia let it go.

“Are we here to discuss policy or logistics?” suggested Croaker, trying to get them back on track. “If the dementors speak parseltongue like Potter told us, and he does too, why not send him there and have him talk with them? If you have demands for them, state them and see what they do. They were content watching the fortress for hundreds of years. If the alternative is guarding the prisoners ourselves, why not set up a combined effort? Otherwise, get as many of the dementors in a room as possible and thin them out until you have twenty of them left, then make the same offer. The fact of the matter, as I understand it, is that Potter is the only wizard alive who has the power to kill them off.”

“That may be the best solution,” agreed Amelia, “but there’s a bright red line that separates fighting back in self-defense and execution. I doubt that Harry would cross it, even at your request.”

“So we pay him to do a dirty job,” argued Scrimgeour.

“Let’s decide what you want to do first then work through the logistics,” suggested Croaker.

“Actually, it might be rather simple,” offered Scrimgeour. “He’s friends with the Abbotts, right?”

Amelia nodded.

Scrimgeour said, “We get them all in a room. Potter tells the ten that he let go the first time to leave the room then he attacks the ones who tried to kill Abbott’s daughter.”

“Fine, unless the other ten are highly offended and vow a millenium of revenge,” observed Amelia. She didn’t want to start a war with a band of elusive dementors if she could help it.

“It’s simpler than that,” suggested Scrimgeour. “They don’t know that Potter is the only one who can cast the spell.”

“So your two ideas are to try and kill some of them off or let them go back to work. Why not ask them first then make a decision? They might all agree, or they might be split on the issue. If Potter is correct, they returned to the island because he told them to.”

“How many of them are there?” asked Scrimgeour.

“There were two hundred give or take,” replied Croaker. “We don’t know how they came to be, how long they’ve been here, or how they think. We could take an opportunity to communicate with them before we exterminate them. We barely have the resources to be fighting one war; we don’t need our own version of the Russian front.”

“Exactly my point,” argued Scrimgeour. “We have an opportunity to put the issue to bed rather than have it hanging over our chil...”

“I’m sorry, Rufus,” said Croaker, realizing what Scrimgeour had said and left unsaid, “but you’re right. So how do we do this?”

“There are perhaps a fourth of the Aurors who can reliably produce a patronus. We get the dementors into the mess hall in the fortress then seal the entrances. We count them, coach Potter on what we

want to ask or tell them, then make a decision,” suggested Scrimgeour.

“When?” asked Croaker.” His timeframe for an experiment was typically measured in weeks.

“About an hour,” replied Amelia. “I asked Harry and Susan to stop by after lunch. They should be here in fifteen minutes. They go back to school soon, and there really is no point in waiting. I’ll collect all of the Aurors and cadets that can cast a patronus form.”

“I’ll talk with him,” offered Croaker. “You’re too close, Amelia, and you may want to keep an arm’s length away from this, Minister.” He had serious reservations, due to the suddenness of the operation, but elected not to mention them, recognizing that without Potter, they didn’t have a plan. A lot of things could go seriously wrong, and he didn’t look forward to spending the afternoon in a room with over sixty angry dementors.

... -- ...

Harry enjoyed having lunch out with Susan. It had been an extraordinarily stressful few days and they needed a break together. They ate at a little pub several streets away from the Leaky Cauldron. After they had ordered, Susan smiled and remarked, “Fred and George have a lot of fun stuff in their shop. I’d forgotten how much mayhem they caused.”

Harry smiled back and replied, “It’s fun to watch them sell stuff to kids. It’s like they can almost envision the dungbombs going off in class and they have as much fun selling them as the kid who buys them.”

She nodded and asked, “What do you want to do after school, Harry?”

Harry looked in her eyes and asked, “You mean, aside from chasing you around our house?”

Her eyes lit up at his answer and a big smile appeared. She replied, “Well, that part sounds rather nice, at least if I get to chase you back. What would make you happy?”

Harry thought for a moment and replied, "If I could do anything, I'd teach part time at the castle, and make wands and sell them on Saturday mornings. The rest of the time, we could go on outings together. How about you? What would make you happy?"

"Invest our money and start a family. I missed not having brothers or sisters. You could take me flying at night. I love the ocean, but I like the mountain too. I suppose a lot will depend on what happens with the war."

She looked apprehensive for a moment and blurted, "Harry, I'm not as brave as you and nowhere near as skilled in defense, but I love you so much. I'll always be with you and do whatever I can to make you happy. Is that enough?"

Harry stood up from his chair and stepped around the table to hug the witch who he had come to love. For several minutes they didn't say anything. Finally Harry brushed the wet hair from Susan's eyes, kissed her forehead, and replied, "You are everything that I could want, Susan. Please don't doubt yourself, or my feelings for you. We'll get through this and get our chance at a long life together. I promise."

She looked longingly into his eyes, kissed his cheek and softly replied, "Thank you Harry. You're everything that I could want too. We should get to the ministry now. We won't be there long. We'll go see Hannah for a bit then I'll bring you back home and show you how much I care about you."

Harry nodded and replied, "Thanks." A moment later he added, "We should talk with Professor Flitwick about having you take the same classes this term. Michelle was right; you should take advantage of the opportunity. Let's go, then we can go back and have a swim together."

... -- ...

Susan and Harry quickly made their way to the ministry building. There were two Aurors who Harry didn't recognize at the guard station. They nodded at Harry who, as a member of the Wizengamot,

no longer had to wear a visitor badge. Harry held the lift door open for Susan, who pushed the level two button when they got in.

Randi the receptionist smiled at them when they got to the desk, and said, "Chief Croaker is expecting you in conference room B, Mr. Potter. Susan, Director Bones asked to see you in her office."

... -- ...

Harry opened the door and was amused to see Croaker sitting at the table playing solitaire. He stopped when Harry entered, stood and greeted the teen. "Hello, Harry. Thank you for coming. The ministry has a need for your special talents this afternoon. We would like you to accompany us to Azkaban fortress. The purpose of the visit would be to count the dementors, and communicate with them. Some at the ministry would be very willing to have the dementors resume their role guarding the prisoners. Others would just as soon see the dementors wash into the ocean, never to be seen again. Specifically we would like you to go along as a translator. Accompanying us will be sixteen Aurors and cadets who have demonstrated an ability to reliably cast a patronus charm. If things go pear shaped, they will provide sufficient cover to get everyone back to the portkey entry point and get us safely off the island."

"It's a lot harder to cast a patronus when they're around," observed Harry. "I tried teaching some people the spell last winter. It was a lot easier in the classroom than in front of the dementors."

"True," agreed Croaker, "but you must have done a good job coaching Hannah Abbott, based on what she was able to do. Less than five percent of the adult wizarding population can cast the charm, which makes the dementors such a threat if they get loose and roam the countryside. Back to task, if you are ready, the Aurors are assembling in the large meeting room down the hall."

"Okay," replied Harry. "Maybe when we're done, you can tell me a bit more about what you remember about my mum."

Croaker looked at his watch and replied, "Have a seat. They can wait a bit." He felt that sharing a few good stories was the least he could do for the teen.

... -- ...

A half hour later, Harry and Croaker walked down the hallway and entered the large conference room. Croaker pointed to two vacant seats and sat down in the theatre style operation staging room. Scrimgeour was going over the plan with the Aurors. Harry had noticed that most of them appeared to be in their early twenties and nearly half appeared to be new cadets, as they wore the scarlet Auror robes but had a silver, rather than a gold badge on their uniform. Scrimgeour continued his instructions, "Remember, protect yourselves, protect Mr. Potter and don't make the first move. If things go badly, get out and get back to the staging point as quickly as you can. As much as possible, stay away from the dementors."

Amelia walked in and the aurors and cadets all stood. She had them break into four groups. The first group would remain at the staging area on the island guarding it and keeping it clear. The second group would physically explore the fortress and look for other dementors or anyone else on the island. The other two groups would accompany Minister Scrimgeour, Director Bones, Harry and Chief Croaker into the fortress mess hall where they would hope to meet with the dementors.

As they stood, Amelia went up to Harry and said, "I asked Susan to remain here and wait for us. I expect to be back within an hour. Thank you for helping with this. Your ability to directly communicate with them should prove to be very valuable."

Harry looked at her and replied, "Thanks." He didn't mind helping, but never wanted Susan to see another dementor as long as she lived.

Amelia said, "Aurors Tonks and Sunset and Cadets Fawcett and Bradley will be closest to us. Cadets Paulson, Mikelson, Tuttle, and Nib will be guarding the doors. The others will keep the staging area clear and search the outside grounds." She put her hand on his shoulder and said, "Harry, most likely nothing will happen, but don't hesitate to protect yourself or anyone else if it comes to it. We're going on a fact-finding expedition, not a set battle, but everyone needs to keep on their toes."

Harry nodded and replied, "I'm ready, I guess."

They went to the apparition point and twelve of the Aurors went first. Ten seconds later, Harry, Amelia, Croaker, Scrimgeour, Tonks, Sunset, Fawcett and Bradley touched the other portkey chain and Amelia activated it.

... -- ...

Azkaban island was about a half mile square. It was simply a large rock that stood defiantly several miles out in the North Sea. The water was no more than a dozen degrees above freezing, even in mid-August. There was no beach, just a series of jagged rocks that stood guard, menacingly keeping the ocean away. The elevation was twenty to thirty feet above sea level. Whereas Hogwarts castle was warm and inviting, the Azkaban fortress was cold and ideally suited for housing a hundred or so of the most dangerous prisoners that Britain had ever known. There were rows of windowless gray corridors made of fitted stone. The individual cells had either bars or heavy oak locked doors with little windows set at eye level. They walked a ways until they reached the main entrance. It stood unguarded, except by part of the team of four Aurors who had gone ahead to explore the fortress.

As they reached the main doors, Auror Lexus announced, "The dementors are massing just outside the mess hall. We haven't seen them anywhere else, but we will continue searching. The mess hall is to your left all the way down to the end of the corridor, then to your right."

Tonks and Cadet Bradley walked in front of Harry and the ministry officials while Sunset and Fawcett walked behind them. Behind them were Tuttle and Nib. The corridors were lit with torches that seemed to stay lit after they got to the end of the hall, Paulson and Mikelson had gone ahead and had opened the door.

Mikelson had never seen that many dementors before and hoped that he never would have to see them again. Paulson saw his green look and suggested, "Don't get near them and don't let them get near you." Mikelson didn't have to be told twice and had his wand at the ready. He spoke nervously back and forth with Paulson, obviously affected by the close proximity of the dementors. Both men wished

they hadn't volunteered for the duty that day, regardless of the opportunity that they would be seen by both Minister Scrimgeour as well as Director Bones, hoping to be noticed.

... -- ...

Harry and the others waited in the mess hall a few minutes before the dementors floated into the room from the other entrance. Harry felt the wave of cold hit him as they floated into the room. Fortunately the room was as large as a typical school gymnasium, and they floated to the opposite side of the room, lessening the impact that they had on most of the visitors. Amelia counted sixty two of the creatures. As she was counting, they held still, apparently to aid her efforts.

As soon as they were done counting, Scrimgeour told Harry to ask if there were more dementors elsewhere.

Harry screwed up his courage and took a few steps toward them and asked the question. He was doing everything that he could to ignore the cold and keep the horrible thoughts from entering his consciousness. One of the dementors slowly floated forward until it was about thirty feet away from him. It replied, "All that remain of our kind are here. Why have you come?"

Harry relayed the response and the question. Scrimgeour replied, "To understand their intentions. Why did they leave the island and why did they return?"

Harry relayed the question again. The dementor replied, "The dark one promised us much and delivered nothing. We chose to return to this place and live in peace. We will guard your prisoners as we always have and not leave the island again."

Harry relayed the answer. Scrimgeour muttered, "Bullshit."

Croaker said, "Ask him how and when they came to be."

Harry asked, "How old are you?"

The dementor replied, "We were simple villagers once. I was an oblate at a small church, about fifteen years old. A dark wizard of our

time cursed us to this existence. It happened in the year 807. Over the years we found that we could communicate with snakes, particularly the adders and grass snakes that were more common in our day. Worloch still carries the blade that pierced each of us and made us what we are. He and Mcloch will show you.” Several of the dementors floated near Harry.

... -- ...

Cadet Mikelson was certain that this was a bad idea. Everyone knew that dementors could never be trusted. Lost in his own thoughts, he looked up in surprise and saw two dementors coming at him. In a panic, he cast his patronus form, or tried. A nearly formed chimpanzee flew from his wand in a whoosh.

Pandemonium broke out! The patronus frightened the other dementors who scattered, mostly toward the other aurors. Tuttle began firing. Mikelson and Paulson were picked up. The dementor tried to take his wand. Several other dementors followed suit.

Seeing the situation unraveling fast, Scrimgeour called “Potter, fire!”

Amelia grabbed Harry’s shoulder and shouted over the screaming, “Can you control them?”

Harry replied, “I don’t know.”

“AARRGH!” Tonks got picked up.

“Harry, do it!” commanded Bones.

“*Expecto Patronum.*” A solid platinum stag leapt from his wand.

Using both wands in his right hand, Harry cast again and again and a fourth time in rapid succession until he slumped to the ground, unconscious from gross overexertion.

Within seconds, the remains of the dementors were no more than heaps of cloth. On the ground, next to one, was a curious looking dagger. Using a pair of dragon hide gloves, Croaker carefully picked

it up and placed it in a wooden box. He was certain that it had a story, and was worth investigation.

Tonks sat on the ground badly shaken up, but feeling very lucky to be alive. All seven of the aurors as well as herself had been lifted up to receive the Kiss.

... -- ...

Amelia wanted to flay Mickelson and Paulson alive for starting the fight, but her thoughts were on the teen curled up in a ball on the filthy stone floor. She bent down and placed her hand on his neck. He was freezing, but alive. He didn't answer when she called him.

Sunset said, "Let's get him to St. Mungo's."

"No," objected Amelia. "We'll take him to Hogwarts."

"But it's standard procedure for injured or wounded Aurors," replied Sunset. Meanwhile the other Aurors had raced to the mess hall to help, having heard the shouting.

"He's not an Auror, Sunset. Too many people want him dead," replied Amelia. "Bob, help Tonks with Harry. We'll portkey back to the ministry then to Hogwarts. Michelle, meet Susan in my office, and follow us to the castle in about fifteen minutes. Go."

Scrimgeour and Croaker joined the others as they left. One was delighted at the outcome; believing that the people who he was responsible for had been made a bit safer this afternoon; while the other felt that a great learning opportunity had been lost.

... -- ...

Amelia and Sunset brought Harry to the hospital wing. Tonks had used the floo in the Wizengamot office to notify Flitwick and Pomfrey that they were on their way. McGonagall met them at the outer doors to the castle, saw Harry unconscious, and asked, "What happened?"

Tonks replied, "Harry got into a fight with the dementors. He killed them and saved us."

McGonagall asked, "How many of the foul creatures were there?" She had no love for the unholy creatures since they had resided outside the school grounds three years earlier.

Sunset carefully levitated the teen up the stairs to the hospital wing while Amelia answered, "All of them."

... -- ...

Hammer and Daily were called in after the fact. Along with the four Aurors who had stood guard an hour earlier, they accompanied Minister Scrimgeour, Ben Abbott, and reporters from the *Daily Prophet*, *Witch Weekly* and several other publications.

Abbott shared Scrimgeour's feelings regarding the horrible creatures. Neither felt any pity or sense of loss at their demise. Scrimgeour was happy to tell the story, shading it that they had come to inspect and communicate with the dementors and that they had been attacked without provocation, clearly demonstrating that the victors wrote the history books.

... -- ...

As instructed, Michelle walked into Amelia's office fifteen minutes after returning to the ministry building. Susan was there, reading a book, patiently waiting for Harry to return so they could do some shopping together with Hannah. She didn't know that the teen had been told nothing about Harry going to Azkaban.

Placing her hand on the teen's shoulder, the hit witch used her calmest voice to say, "Hi Susan. Director Bones asked me to come and collect you. Harry was taken to Hogwarts."

Susan hadn't quite been listening and asked, "What's he doing there?"

"He's unconscious after the dementor attack. Director Bones, Tonks and Bob Sunset took him there to see Healer Pomfrey."

"*What dementor attack?* He was in the room down the hall talking with Mr. Croaker."

“Harry went with a squad of Aurors, the minister, your aunt, and Chief Croaker to check up on the dementors who had gone back to Azkaban. Apparently they attacked and Harry had to fight them. The dementors tried to kill everyone in the room. I was checking on a different part of the fortress when I heard the screams. By the time I got there, the room was littered with dementor cloaks. Most of the Aurors who were there had been scared witless and Harry was unconscious from destroying them. That’s all I know. We should go. It’s pretty far to apparate. Should we take a portkey?”

“No,” replied Susan. She thought of Freedom as hard as she could. A few moments later, Harry’s remarkable companion appeared in a flash of flame and song. “Give me your hand, Michelle.” She did and a moment later the two witches were at the front gate of the castle.

Susan ran through the hallways and up the stairways until she reached the door to the hospital wing. When she got there, she saw Harry curled up in a ball on one of the beds being examined by Madam Pomfrey. Amelia, Tonks, and Sunset were standing a respectful distance away. Susan went ballistic and shouted, “*What the hell happened?*” There was a tear in her eye as she saw her boyfriend there looking so scared and helpless.

Tonks looked at Amelia and tried to explain what had happened to the now nearly hysterical teen.

Before she could get half a sentence out, Susan shouted, “It *wasn’t his job* to go with and kill those horrible creatures. We were having lunch together. We should have been spending the afternoon at Hannah’s, not at that horrible place. You had no right to ask him to go there.” She slid to the floor, sobbing.

Sunset and Tonks exchanged guilty looks then glanced at Amelia. Sunset said, “Director, we should get back to the ministry if you don’t need us here anymore.”

Amelia nodded and said, “Thank you Auror Sunset, Tonks. Dismissed.” She needed to make peace with her niece and wasn’t sure how. Looking at it from her point of view, the teen was spot on, and they’d had no right to get Harry involved. Worse than that, she

hadn't mentioned to Susan beforehand what their plans had been. Given a reversal of roles, she would be furious herself.

... -- ...

Poppy could find nothing wrong with her favorite patient other than a severe case of magical exhaustion. Harry slept through the afternoon, and no one felt inclined to bother him. After hearing what had happened, Susan refused to leave his side and kept casting glaring looks at her aunt.

Amelia felt as if she had been manipulated into coercing Harry into the de-facto position of Ministry Executioner. When she had the chance, she would replay her memory and watch exactly what happened between Mickelson and Paulson and the dementors. *Had one simply strayed too close to the two cadets or had there been an aggressive move?* She wondered what Harry and the dementor had been talking about, but knew that the answer, while doubtless interesting, could wait for his recovery.

As she sat with Susan, she thought about the upcoming trials. Pansy Parkinson would almost certainly be convicted and, if Scrimgeour had his way, sent through the veil ten minutes after. In truth, she had a hard time finding any slant that would shed a favorable light on the teen's actions. The teen had been paid an obscene amount of gold for her part in the mass breakout, had done her job effectively, but hadn't had the sense to disappear immediately afterward. The presence of the pile of gold in her room eliminated her using the standard Malfoy defense, claiming Imperius. Bones was all but certain that the busty teen wouldn't live to see September.

Edgecombe was a similar case. Nine Aurors had been murdered as a result of her greed. Riddle had certainly paid well and she had willingly taken the blood money. Both trials had been scheduled for the end of the week.

... -- ...

Remus picked up the evening edition of the *Daily Prophet*. There was a ghastly photo of the Azkaban mess hall that Hammer had released, showing Anna and the other Aurors standing amongst the cloaks.

The headline read, *62 Dementors Attack Inspection Team – Harry Potter, the dementor exterminator.*

He put the paper down and wondered how much of the truth had been told and how much had been shaded. Like Croaker, he didn't view extermination as the solution to every non-wizarding magical being in the world.

... -- ...

As Harry rested, a strange vision came to him. He felt pain and darkness. His breathing was shallow and labored. It wasn't the pain that Riddle usually inflicted as he tortured his victims or even his own Death Eaters. This was pain that Riddle was feeling himself.

Harry tossed and turned as he drifted in and out of consciousness. Susan had insisted on staying at the castle with him, while Amelia had to return to the ministry to finish some work.

... -- ...

As Susan held Harry's hand while he rested, Molly Weasley put the newspaper down on her kitchen table. Like Lupin, she had read the article about the dementors and wondered if the war was still unfolding, or slowly getting buttoned up.

There had been no word of her son in the paper, and no word from anyone at the ministry. Like every other evening, the grieving mum shed silent tears as she stared out the window into her back garden watching the gathering darkness, hoping beyond hope that her missing son would suddenly appear and walk back into her life.

Like every other evening, her greatest wish went unfulfilled.

... -- ...

Amelia arrived home at nine that evening. Michelle was patrolling the outside of the home and Smidgen, the house elf, was waiting for her mistress to arrive home. Immediately she missed the noise and laughter that Susan and Harry had brought to her home.

She pulled her memory of the event out and placed it in her pensieve to look at it. *The sixty-two dementors had stood a respectful distance away and clearly were posing no threat at the beginning of the meeting. Harry took a few steps forward and began speaking in parseltongue with the leader. Covering one of the exits to the room she saw Mikelson and Paulson. Mikelson was talking with Paulson, not being totally aware of the proceedings. The dementor leader apparently called on two of the dementors to come forward. They silently headed towards Harry when Mikelson looked up, obviously startled to see them so close and cast a patronus form apparently as a knee-jerk reaction. The leader and the two who had been coming toward Harry never moved. Almost immediately two other dementors rushed to Mikelson and Paulson and picked them up.*

At that time Cadet Tuttle fired a patronus and the dementors made a rush to the Aurors. Two had picked up Tuttle and Nibb.

Scrimgeour shouted at Harry then she asked him to fire. In the mean time, other Aurors began attacking. Most only managed formless vapor and were defenseless. She watched Mikelson. The dementor snapped his wand after picking him up. It hadn't made a move to give him the soul-sucking kiss.

Within three seconds Harry had cast four of the solid patronus forms then slumped to the floor. The leader and the two others never moved, though the others had gone into full attack mode, probably terrorized by the various patronus forms. Within another ten seconds it was over. The solid forms had killed every dementor who had picked anyone up then charged down the others.

She could see no aggressive move that they had made. Mikelson's lapse of attention caused the destruction of the dementors and nearly got them all killed. The only things she didn't know was why the other two had moved in the first place and what was the significance of the item that Croaker had placed into the wooden box. Many of those answers would have to wait until Harry was able to explain what he had heard. Hopefully he would be awake when she went to visit in the morning.

... -- ...

Harry tossed and turned in his sleep. He dreamt that he was in courtroom ten again, this time being judged. Up in the Wizengamot box he saw Dumbledore, his parents, the Dursleys, Neville, Ron, Oliver Wood, Cedric, Sirius and the other victims from the last year.

Minister Fudge was acting as prosecutor telling the jurors, "The only reason that you are here is because of Harry Potter. *He* is the cause of all of your problems. If he had done his job properly a year ago, you would all be safe in your homes."

... -- ...

About midnight, Poppy saw a flash in the dimly lit patient area and went out to investigate. Freedom the phoenix had arrived and was sitting on the headboard of the bed, singing softly as Susan sat loyally in a little chair next to the bed, holding Harry's hand. The master healer hadn't heard the details of what had happened at the prison, but imagined them to be highly unpleasant. She had stood in opposition to hosting the dementors three years ago. Doing what she could, she found a light blanket for the strawberry blonde teen and carefully straightened the sheets on Harry's bed so as not to accidentally wake him up.

As the little phoenix continued to sing softly, Harry stopped thrashing and Susan closed her eyes and finally drifted off to a gentle sleep.

... -- ...

There was a very lively discussion going on at the staff table when Poppy sat down for breakfast the next morning. "There will always be thugs," declared Sprout, "but if the papers are to be believed, he single handedly got rid of Lestrage and some two hundred dementors. The others who went with him probably wet themselves and he ended up saving the lot of em."

Vectra agreed, adding, "Enrollment is barely hanging on as it is. We need a highly visible instructor who can actually transfer skills. Minerva, you were hired right out of school; what's the difference?"

“Two things; he hasn’t passed his NEWTs and we haven’t completed his education. I doubt that the Board of Governors would certify him as a professor regardless of his qualifications.”

Flitwick said, “You all have good points. He would be among the most controversial choices that we have made and we need to be fair to him with respect to honoring our commitments to him as well. I have an idea that might work. Michelle Wood will be continuing his private lessons. She also will be involved taking care of Oliver’s baby girl. She could deliver the academic portions of the classes and Harry could supervise the practical portions, ostensibly under her tutelage. That would give Michelle time with baby Lisa, a position with regular hours, and the best possible option for the students. At the same time, Harry gets his own training handled.”

Poppy replied, “Amelia is upstairs right now visiting Harry and Susan. You might as well go talk with her and sound her out.”

Flitwick and Poppy made their way up the stairway to the hospital wing. Minerva followed them a few seconds behind. They arrived to see Harry sitting up talking with Susan and Amelia. They stopped their conversation as soon as they saw Pomfrey and Flitwick enter. Susan greeted them.

Flitwick replied, “Good morning, Susan, Amelia. It’s good to see you awake again Harry.”

Harry replied, “Thank you, Professor. I feel much better now.”

Poppy inquired, “Amelia, my understanding is that Oliver and Jennifer named Michelle Godmother to Baby Lisa. Her current position would not be conducive to raising the baby, at least until she gets a few years older.”

Amelia nodded, sensing where the conversation was going.

Poppy continued, “We could easily offer care and living space for the infant. She would be well tended and given plenty of attention while Michelle was here.”

Flitwick stepped in “We were wondering if Michelle could be placed on loan to the school, at least for the year. Our plan was that in addition to the private lessons which have been arranged for Mr. Potter...”

“And me,” piped in Susan.

“In addition to the private lessons for Harry and Susan,” corrected Flitwick while Amelia gave Susan an amused look. “We were wondering if she could serve as the defense instructor. We were hoping to split it into a practical application and a theory piece. We would like Mr. Potter to assist as his schedule permits.”

“So you would like Hit Wizard Wood to be the instructor for the practical piece?” asked Amelia.

“Heavens no,” replied Flitwick. “The students would insist on Mr. Potter for that. He is a gifted instructor with respect to teaching practical applications. The NEWT and OWL scores in defense last term were the highest ever recorded. The students who did best attributed their success to the coaching that they received from Harry.”

“And you could afford to have two instructors on staff?” asked Amelia, glancing at Harry and giving him a small wink.

“We hadn’t considered that would be a problem,” replied McGonagall, not really knowing how much Hit Wizards were paid. She paled slightly and glanced at Flitwick. Due to a lower enrollment this year, all of the Hogwarts staff knew that the budget would be much tighter than usual.

The little headmaster stated, “I’m certain that we could manage to match Miss Wood’s salary.”

Harry glanced at Amelia and could see her wicked streak arising. She said, “Professor, the Ministry will continue to pay Wood’s salary, should she accept your offer. I was, of course, referring to Mr. Potter. He has been doing some part-time work for my department this summer.”

Harry could feel his face growing red, and would have tried to put a stop to it, but he recognized that Amelia had been given precious few opportunities to have fun lately.

Flitwick recognized that she was winding him up and decided to play along. He said, "Of course, you're right, Director. Perhaps Professor McGonagall could work something out."

McGonagall hadn't caught on and walked right into Bones' spoof asking, "We probably could match it. What was he paid working for the ministry?" She assumed that ministry internships were paid minimal wages and would find the money in one of the reserve funds that she managed.

Amelia reached into her pocket, pulled out an envelope and replied, "His last check was sixty-two times ten." She paused a bit for effect and finished saying, "six hundred and twenty... thousand Galleons." She walked over to Harry, kissed him on the forehead and handed him the receipt that Gringotts had given her when she had deposited his last bank draft for him.

McGonagall had to take a seat to catch her breath. Susan whispered something in Flitwick's ear. He nodded and replied, "Mr. Potter, obviously I can't match Director Bones' extraordinary terms, but in my own limited experience, you earned every knut twice over. How about private quarters for yourself and Miss Bones, free tuition and medical care, a supply of butterbeer and all of the unicorn tail hair that Hagrid can find to help with your wandmaking?"

Susan gave Harry's hand a squeeze and he said, "It's a deal, Professor. Thank you."

... -- ...

McGonagall sat at her office desk and gave the old scribe a withering look. "Mr. Crow, you seem to have taken a sense of delight in having moments of levity at my expense. I am always in need of subjects to use in demonstrating human transfiguration. Perhaps I could repay your sense of humor in kind.

The old scribe suddenly remembered that he had an appointment to visit a golf course, gathered up his papers and hurried out the door. Before he left, he dropped a hastily scribbled piece of parchment on her desk. The Transfiguration Master picked it up and read, CarolWim, Storyteller.

... -- ...

Chapter Twenty Four – Questions and Answers

Old-Crow, Scribe

Wednesday 14 August

As Susan and Harry were negotiating talking with Professor Flitwick, Hermione was getting ready to go swimming in the pool in her backyard. Her parents had afternoon appointments that day and were sitting at the umbrella table in the back garden reading the *Times* and the *Sun*. A delivery owl dropped off the daily subscription and flew off. As Hermione was in the pool, Dan placed the little coins in the owl's leg pouch and it flew away.

He glanced at the headline. *Harry Potter Saves Ministry Officials from Dementors*, and called, "Hermione, you may want to look at this."

Hermione got out of the pool and walked over to the table. She picked up the paper and read the article describing the attack. The *Daily Prophet* had slanted it such that the dementors had started an unprovoked attack during a routine inspection of the prison that Harry just happened to have been on. There were photos of the cloaks and a sentence indicating that Potter and several of the Aurors had been sent to the hospital for observation. Knowing that he would be sent to Hogwarts rather than St. Mungo's, she told her parents, "I'm going to go visit him."

Emma nodded, knowing what the young man meant to her daughter and replied, "Give him our best as well, Dear."

Hermione went inside to put on a pair of jeans and a light top. She kissed her mum and dad goodbye and disappeared.

... -- ...

Ron sat quietly in his cell. It wasn't uncomfortable, except for the fact that it was small, windowless, and he had been held prisoner for over a week. Voldemort had left clear instructions that he was to be fed and not bothered. As the Dark Lord had a well earned reputation for being merciless with followers who intentionally defied his instructions, no one wanted to do anything that would hurt the lanky teen.

Needless to say, Ron would have told anyone who cared that he was being grossly underfed, and was in mortal peril at all times, but neither statement was really true. The house elf fed him twice a day and the only other contact he'd had was with Lisa Rosier who had walked by several times to visually inspect his conditions.

As Hermione was visiting Harry, Rosier peered into Weasley's cell. She called, "Are you okay in there?"

Ron looked up, saw that she was there alone, and hadn't brought anyone along with visions of torturing him. Taking a leaf from Harry's book, he looked up, nodded and replied, "I'm fine." At the moment, his Gryffindor bravery seemed to have escaped him. In truth, he was terrified, even though it had been several days since the Dark Lord had sifted through his mind. He hoped that someone was trying to find him.

She looked at him for a few moments and turned to walk away. Before she could get out of earshot, he called, "Do you have an extra chess set?"

She kept going and disappeared without saying a word. Two hours later, she returned with a small plastic set and shoved it through the food slot in the door.

... -- ...

After Hermione left, Harry was ready to leave the hospital wing on Wednesday afternoon. Before he left, Poppy brought him a letter and said, "This arrived for you a few minutes ago."

"Thank you," replied Harry, still not comfortable with the idea of calling the Master Healer by her first name.

"Who's it from?" asked Susan who was more than a bit curious at the copperplate handwriting.

Harry opened the letter and began reading it.

Mr. Potter,

I have been pleased to read of your successes with your new wands and hope that you will consider receiving additional instruction in the art of crafting them. I would be happy to assist you in your endeavors when I return. In the mean while, you should begin collecting pieces of wood and core materials as you are able.

You should be able to find clear pieces of birch, oak, maple and walnut within a few miles of the home where you are staying. Hagrid could probably be persuaded to collect unicorn tail hair for you as he finds it in the forbidden forest. You should endeavor to collect tail feathers from your remarkable companion before she has burning days. As we previously discussed, the feathers will have the most magic the fewer the burnings that she has had. In general, you would want to keep the first few batches for your own personal use, and use those gathered after the second burning for wands that you make for others on a normal basis.

As you are now a registered wandmaker, it would be legal for you to acquire a dragon heart for later use. The material would have to age several years before it would be sufficiently dried and stable enough for use as wand material. I understand that you are acquainted with Charlie Weasley. Perhaps he could help procure a specimen from either a Chinese Fireball or a Ridgeback. Either would yield enough material for eight – ten dozen wands. You may want to collect several if you have the means and the opportunity. As I mentioned, the aging process cannot be rushed, and once you start making them, you will likely find quite a market for them. I will contact you again around Halloween to learn of your progress in collecting materials. Recall that the aging process for woods is a minimum of three years with eight to ten being optimal for preventing warping, so you will want to get started collecting materials as you have the opportunity. In the mean while, I have accumulated a sufficient supply of woods that I could provide you enough to allow you to get started when you have obtained some core materials.

Best wishes in your endeavors,

Ramone Ollivander

Harry handed the letter to Susan to read. When she was done, she suggested, "Professor Sprout could probably give you some pointers in harvesting good pieces of wood and how to properly store the pieces to dry before they could be split. She might have the time to show you this afternoon, or we could come back later in the week if you'd rather get home."

"No, let's go see her now if you don't mind," suggested Harry. He had found a hobby that he was good at and really enjoyed, and hoped to pursue it as time permitted.

They visited the earthen witch with the fly-away hair. As Susan predicted, she was delighted to help Harry, and spent several hours showing him how to recognize different trees. She explained that he would want to learn how to slice the wood into lengths to dry naturally for a season before re-cutting the lengths of wood into one inch diameter blanks. She explained why he couldn't simply go to a muggle lumber yard as the kiln drying technique that was invariably used in muggle lumber-making would ruin many of the properties of the wood with respect to wand-making.

Harry and Susan thanked her for her time as they walked back to the castle to check back with Professor Flitwick. He arranged to have them return to the castle the next morning at eight along with Michelle.

They walked out of the castle and Susan suggested, "Rather than apparate all the way home, let's see if Freedom will help us."

Harry thought of his little companion and a moment later she appeared in a flash and fluttered onto his outstretched arm. Harry stroked the golden bird a few times then asked her, "Could you take us home, girl?"

The beautiful bird sang a note and hopped onto Harry's shoulder. He held Susan's hand and a few moments later, they were standing in the back garden. Harry nearly fainted in shock; almost all of the ministry aurors were there! There was a long table piled high with food, and a large banner that read *Welcome Home, Mr. Potter and Thanks!* All of the Aurors had signed it. Looking around, Harry saw Scrimgeour, Abbott, and several members of the Wizengamot who

had befriended Harry earlier in the summer. The Weasleys and the Grangers had also been invited as well as Hannah and her mum.

Susan looked at her Aunt. Amelia seemed to be enjoying herself. Harry had earned a dozen life debts that day at Azkaban, at least as many at the courtroom, and the aurors were more than happy to show their appreciation to the young man who had removed the threat of dementors from the island and shown remarkable courage under fire. There were no *"Friends of Dementors"* banners in the back yard. Despite Croaker's objections that they could have learned much from communicating with the unusual creatures, no one really felt bad that they had been removed from the Earth.

Susan realized that this was her Aunt's way of trying to mend the rift between them. She had never been one to hold a grudge. As Tonks had grabbed Harry to introduce him to a few of her co-workers, Susan went over to Amelia and said, "Thanks, Auntie. This was really nice of you to arrange." A moment later, she added, "I'm sorry that I got so mad the other day. I just..."

Amelia gave Susan a hug and admitted, "No, you were right to be mad. We should have talked about it beforehand. I apologize and hope that circumstances won't cause a repeat. Hannah's over by the table. Why don't you go say hi."

Ben Abbott had been nearby and heard their conversation. He walked over and commented, "That was a very hard conversation to have had, Amelia. You did well. I'm not so sure that Hannah would have been so quick to forgive me."

Enjoying a sip of wine, Amelia reflected, "I must admit, I've given her plenty of opportunities in the last few years to find reasons to forgive me for things that I should have done better. Parenting seems to get harder each year as they get older. I always thought that the toddler years would have been the hardest."

Ben chuckled in agreement and replied, "So much for that idea." A moment later he asked, "Are they really gone?"

"The dementors? There were none left on the island after Harry destroyed them, and we haven't had any sightings of any others. To

answer your question, I believe so. Harry had been talking with them when the attack started, so he probably would know best. I haven't had an opportunity to ask him about what they said, and honestly, I would prefer not to do it this evening. I'll ask him in the morning."

Abbott nodded. The dementors could all sizzle in a frying pan and it would be fine with him. He added, "I ran into Michelle Wood today. She mentioned that she would be doing some teaching at Hogwarts and was going to see about adopting her niece."

Amelia reflected, "Teaching at Hogwarts would make it a lot easier for her to be a parent for little Lisa. I was office bound by the time that Susan arrived, and it was still hard. Honestly, I don't know how I could have managed it without Becky and Smidgen."

Ben replied, "We never minded, and she turned out to be a remarkable young woman."

Always one to give credit where due, Amelia nodded and replied, "I would agree, but much of who she is today is due to her friends. Hannah has been good for her."

Ben smiled and replied, "I think it's fair to say that they have been good for each other. Hannah took her studies a lot more seriously last term. I credit Susan for that. Speaking of friends, I understand that Susan and Harry Potter are seeing each other."

Amelia nodded and reflected, "Yes. He's the kindest wizard I could have wished for her and at the same time, the most frightening person to be around that I've ever met. Frightening probably isn't the right term; he has incredible skills. As he says, he doesn't go looking for trouble; it seems to find him."

"True," admitted Ben, "but the war seems to have made its way into both of our homes on its own, and he has done an amazing amount to keep it in check."

Amelia nodded and replied, "You're right. Thanks for the sanity check. Go get something to eat before the cadets polish off the entire spread."

Ben nodded and observed, "They do seem to be acting like a bunch of ravenous teenagers."

Amelia nodded and observed, "There are so many new cadets this year, a lot of them are still teenagers. Most of the newest class of cadets are only a year or two past finishing at Hogwarts. It's the largest class that we've ever had. Not a one is older than twenty-two. The ironic thing is that the war will likely be over before they finish academy."

"Let's hope so," replied Ben. He was lost in thought for a moment and replied, "I was serious about getting Scrimgeour to double the bounty on the dementors. I intend to introduce a resolution at the next meeting."

Amelia shook her head, and replied, "I really don't think that's necessary. I deposited the draft into Harry's account while he was resting in the hospital wing. I'm only glad that it wasn't presented posthumously. There have been some rumblings of favoritism relating to the distribution of the bounties already."

Ben shook his head and replied, "I don't recall seeing a queue of volunteers waiting to go one-on one with Bellatrix, let alone Voldemort. I'd say that he's earned every knut, thrice over."

"Maybe," agreed Amelia, "but I hope it doesn't lead to some cadet or young auror taking an absurd risk and getting killed over a bounty."

Ben nodded and suggested, "Time will tell. I think I'll try some of the ribs. They look delicious."

Amelia nodded and replied, "Help yourself, and thanks again, Ben."

A few minutes later, Minister Scrimgeour found his way to the table and conjured himself a podium. There was a call for quiet and the dozens of conversations fell to a silence. Scrimgeour said, "Good afternoon. May I have your attention?"

The remaining conversations died away, and he truly did have everyone's attention. He began, "I have a few announcements and this does seem to be the proper venue for it. As most of you know,

the last of the dementors have been eliminated from Britain. We have Mr. Harry Potter to thank for lifting that albatross from our lives. As many of you know, there was a bounty placed on the dementors, which I have happily paid to Mr. Potter on behalf of the decent wizarding people of the British Isles. In addition, I would like to recognize the achievement and magnitude of the accomplishment, by presenting Mr. Potter as the newest recipient of the Order of Merlin, first class."

Harry was highly embarrassed by all of the attention, but no one wanted to hear that it was mostly luck or that he had a lot of help. Too many of the people standing there owed their very lives to Harry, and most of the people there had seen him in action at one time or another. The applause was thunderous and heartfelt.

A few minutes later Scrimgeour got up again and announced, "As a member of the Order of Merlin, Mr. Potter is granted Defense Master accreditation and has agreed to co-teach defense against the dark arts at Hogwarts this term."

If the applause was thunderous last time, it was like a cannon blast with the teaching announcement. The students who were there cheered nonstop for almost five minutes – five minutes that Harry wished he could have spent in a hole in the ground. He'd have gladly given it all up in a heartbeat to have had Ron back.

... -- ...

As he was being congratulated and having his photo taken with any number of combinations of the guests who had been invited, Harry's attention drifted back to the conversation that they'd had with Hermione a few hours ago.

Naturally his bushy haired friend had gone to the local library and done all of the reading on hostage situations, prisoners of war and other related topics that she could find. The reading that she had done had not comforted her.

"Have they made any demands?" she asked.

"None that we've been told of," replied Susan.

“And none of the captured Death Eaters know where they might have taken him?”

“Auntie told me that Minister Scrimgeour’s afraid of another prison escape attempt like they had at Azkaban where the Aurors guarding them were killed and he’s been very quick to send them through the veil.”

Hermione frowned at the answer and asked, “Did they have a history of abducting and holding prisoners in the last war?”

“No,” replied Harry. “The Professor told me that there were quite a number of instances where people were abducted, but never seen again.”

“Who knows where he’s being held?” asked Hermione, obviously frustrated that she was no closer to an answer than before.

“Riddle, Lestrangle, the Rosier girl and whoever else they left the courtroom with would know. Mr. Weasley told me that there were three or four other Death Eaters up in the lobby besides the one that he hit, so they probably do too. Some of the others might have too. Lestrangle is ...”

“Where she needs to be, Harry,” corrected Susan. “I’ve talked with Auntie about Ron. There’s no undisclosed news relating to him, but they can’t take everyone off their regular duties and go house to house all over Britain asking, ‘Excuse me, are there any dark wizards in your home holding teenaged hostages?’ They simply don’t have the manpower and even if they found his house, the Auror going up to it would almost certainly get killed at the front door.”

“So what can we do?” asked Hermione, tears welling in her eyes.

“Wait,” replied Susan with a certainty that neither Harry nor Hermione would have expected. They weren’t the words that the Gryffindors wanted to hear, but they made sense.

... -- ...

“Harry, are you all right?”

“Sorry, Mrs. Abbott. I just drifted off for a minute.”

She squeezed his arm a bit and said, “I wanted to thank you for helping Hannah with her patronus last term. It saved our lives. I also want to thank you for getting rid of those horrible creatures that almost killed us.”

Harry reflected for a moment and replied, “I suppose so. They were people once.”

Becky glanced at Amelia, and gave her “The look” and she walked over to hear Harry tell his story.

“The one that I talked with was about my age when a dark wizard turned his whole village into what they became. He had been a student of some kind at a little church. He told me that it had happened in the early 800s. I think he said 807.”

“They tried to kill us last week,” countered Becky. “They weren’t innocent.”

“No, but like werewolves, they didn’t get a choice in what they had become. The one named Mcloch had obtained some kind of cursed blade that had been used to make them. He was going to hand it to me when the cadet attacked them.”

Tonks had also been close enough to overhear the conversation. She turned her hair orange and stated, “Harry, perspective is a twisted thing. They might have been inviting you over for tea too, but five seconds later one had me in the air and I was saying my prayers. Someone heard mine, and somehow you saved our arses, again. No one forced them to get involved with Voldemort. No one walked away singing songs either, but we were able to walk away, well limp away anyway; my bum is still black and blue from getting dropped on it. You had like two seconds to react and you did. Any of us who were there would have done the same thing if we’d had the power to. As the muggle coppers would say, ‘It was a good shoot.’ You need to put it in your pensieve and somehow let it go.”

There was silence all around them. Tonks had been ranting a bit louder than she meant to and quite a number of people have been

listening. Amelia and the others may have worded their message a bit softer than the spirited, and at the moment, overly emotional young Auror. However, her message was consistent with the creed among the Aurors – do what you need to do to end your shift and help your partner do the same. The young man being honored this afternoon certainly had better fighting skills than most of the people who had been invited, or he'd had the opportunity to hone and put them to practical use in the last few weeks. However, he hadn't received any training on how to get past the aftermath of firefights and was vacillating between believing himself a murderer and to a lesser degree, trying to handle a massive dose of survivor's guilt.

Moody limped over. Naturally he had accepted the offer to attend the gathering; primarily because he had a lot of respect for the young teen with fantastic skills and a solid brass pair, but also at the offer of free food. He remarked, "Tonks, you must have been paying attention in some of my classes. You do what you have to in order to end your shift in one piece. You help your partner do the same. Later on, you can question the wisdom of having gotten yourself in given situation in the first place, but as often as not, orders are orders and you let it go at that."

Amelia silently prayed that the growing discussion wouldn't end badly. She was ready to offer Harry a lifetime pass to the ministry therapist after what he'd been through, but realized that her teen was way too high profile a person for the normal level of patient confidentiality to hold up. She envisioned state secret information getting out or Harry's character being ruined by the fickle nature of the press and knew that he needed and could afford a private alternative.

Harry was at the edge of experiencing a panic attack. *'What did people expect of me? Am I supposed to feel guilty that some idiot cadet panicked and caused a lot of deaths. Am I supposed to not care about the deaths, simply because they weren't ordinary people? Was I not supposed to help out Amelia? She needed the help.'*

Susan gave her aunt her death glare and handed Harry a butterbeer, making certain to maximize the physical contact between them. She whispered in his ear, "Come on Harry, Hannah and Hermione saved

us a place. We need to go sit by them and get something to eat.” She gave a tug at his arm and he reluctantly followed.

After they left, Amelia announced, “That’s enough shop talk for one day. Let’s get something to eat and take the war off the plate for the evening.” She was thankful that Rufus had pushed through the paperwork to provide Harry the highly prestigious award, but felt that the timing for presenting it couldn’t have been worse.

Susan knew that Harry needed to see some friendly, gentle faces, be the recipient of plenty of loving touch and have a few days of completely stress free living. At this point, she was ready to hex the whole group if they did anything else to disturb her boyfriend.

... -- ...

Molly Weasley had seen the discussion between Tonks, Moody and Harry. Like Susan, she had strong feelings about what had happened. She felt that no one at the ministry had the right to involve a child in the ministry’s business. Like Susan, she felt that Harry needed some loving attention to heal. Unlike Susan, Molly felt that she would be the best person to provide Harry with the mothering that she obviously felt that he needed.

Fortunately, Hermione and Hannah saw her coming and quietly got up from the table to head her off. Hermione knew that Ron’s mum meant well, but both were too emotionally wounded at the time to be able to help each other. Molly was carrying the abduction of her son badly and the teenaged witches refused to allow her to use Harry as a crutch for the day.

Hermione spoke first. “Hi, Mrs. Weasley. Did you get something to eat?”

Molly replied, “No, Dear. I wanted to check up on Harry to see what I could do to help him. He really should be staying with us this summer.”

“He’s fine here, Mrs. Weasley. He’s tired and a bit worn out from all that has happened in the last few days. Maybe we can all come over and visit for an afternoon the week before school starts. Would that

be okay? Harry just wanted to have a quiet dinner right now with his girlfriend and all of this got scheduled at the last minute. It's not that he doesn't want to see you right now, but he's really not up to the stress of trying to find the right words to say."

"But..."

Hannah gave Molly the death glare and said, "He put down those monsters that tried to murder my family last week and can't worry about anything else until he gets over that." She was ready to hex the older woman into the next life if necessary and at that point felt no hesitation in doing so.

"But *the Order* should be..."

Hermione clenched her teeth and in a loud whisper retorted, "Mrs. Weasley, the Order doesn't exist anymore, at least not in a meaningful way. The Ministry is doing what it can and Harry is doing the rest. The Professor is gone, Mrs. Weasley, so is Minister Fudge. Harry is the one who has a phoenix familiar, not you or I. He has enough on his plate right now without marshalling a militia. Please give him the space that he needs."

Fortunately, Arthur had witnessed the emotionally charged conversation and wasn't personally engaged in the escalating battle of wills. He nodded at Hermione and said, "Come along Molly; Ginny needs some attention at the moment." Reluctantly the matronly witch allowed herself to be led away.

It had been a defining moment for Hermione. Never before had she stood up to an adult and faced them off as an equal. The two spent the rest of the evening running interference on Harry's behalf, allowing him to be visited by a few classmates, Flitwick, the Weasley twins, Hagrid, Connie and Anna.

By seven, all of the people who had been invited had come and left. Quite a number of the aurors had come later due to shift changes and the like. Several minor ministry officials had attempted to circumvent Hermione or Hannah, only to find themselves blocked by a no-nonsense hit-witch who politely offered to take their names in the event that Harry felt up to making an appointment later in the week.

... -- ...

Harry woke early Thursday morning, feeling better than he had in days. He showered and got dressed. Smidgen had coffee made and started a light English breakfast. Susan came down a minute later and wrapped her arms gently around Harry. He drew her in and drank up the light scent of vanilla that she often wore.

Amelia came down a moment later and smiled as she saw them together. There was no doubt in her mind that both Susan and Harry were better people for having grown together. Susan was physically in near perfect condition, having shed ten pounds of body fat and added nearly the same amount in muscle. She still possessed her kind-hearted spirit, but supplemented it with a dose of self-confidence and had the skills to back it up.

Harry was practically a different person from the abused boy that she had removed from an unloving home. He had gained fifteen pounds of muscle and grown three inches. He hardly resembled the rag-a-muffin that she had first met a little more than a year ago. Some of the clothing that they had purchased the first days that he was with them was too small. She would encourage them to ask Madam Malkin to make another house call before they left for school.

She wondered about the coming school year, hoping that it would be quiet enough with the Death Eaters and Riddle pushed back a bit. She knew that at least half of the Death Eaters were still out there and that there was no global shortage of thugs. Hopefully the summer had exposed the bigotry for what it was and the old-line families who may have offered financial support rather than sons or daughters had finally seen Riddle for what he was – a megalomaniac killer. The Wizengamot had certainly shifted several seats to the light side as well as the Board of School Governors. Scrimgeour had ridden the wave of successes that Harry had helped provide into a wave of unprecedented popularity. He seemed to be doing the right things and for the most part, even their mistakes smelled like roses.

At Scrimgeour's direction and with the incremental funding that had been obtained from Narcissa Malfoy, they were adding a second class of fifteen auror cadets to the first class that had been formed six

months ago. He had funding to add a third class six months from now if Amelia was able to find cadets and sufficient instructors. Depending on how the war went, they would eventually be funneled into the auror corps, the hitwizard group or guard duty. In the meanwhile, a portion of the extra funding that they had received was going into overtime wages and death benefits.

Amelia gave each of the two teens a hug, greeted them, and asked, "What are your plans for the day?"

Susan replied, "Michelle is coming over in a few minutes. We're training for two hours then going to Hogwarts to meet with Professor Flitwick and McGonagall. Harry and Michelle are going to work through the lesson plans and Professor McGonagall is going to help me plan my coursework."

"Are you certain that you want to take the special coursework?" asked Amelia, knowing her Niece's answer in advance.

"Yes," replied Susan with a conviction that her Aunt had rarely heard before.

"Okay," replied Amelia. "I think you should consider taking one or two more courses than Harry, since he will be spending most of his morning time teaching defense."

Susan nodded and replied, "I had planned of taking the potions class with Professor Slughorn and arithmancy. This is the schedule that I had talked about with Professor Flitwick." She handed Amelia a parchment.

Monday – morning reading, afternoon individual transfiguration

Tuesday – morning reading, afternoon individual defense, and individual healing after dinner

Wednesday – morning reading, individual charms and estate management after dinner

Thursday – morning NEWT potions, afternoon individual defense and individual healing after dinner

Friday – morning NEWT arithmancy, afternoon individual defense

Saturday – free time in the afternoons

Sunday – free time

“It seems like a lot of classes,” observed Amelia. She noted that several variations had been lined out and written over. Obviously Flitwick was trying hard to accommodate her plans.

“It is,” admitted Susan, “but there’s no written homework with defense, transfiguration, charms, healing, or estate management. We’ve been doing a lot of the advance reading in the last few weeks and have more to go. Professor McGonagall is giving us copies of the lesson plans for the different topics today so we can stay ahead of them. I should be able to get my NEWT potions and arithmancy homework done on the mornings that I don’t have class.”

Amelia considered her words for a moment and replied, “It sounds reasonable; how about you, Harry?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Susan and Professor Flitwick worked a lot of her plans out while I was asleep in the hospital wing. I expect that’s what he wanted to talk about today.”

“Let me know how it goes,” replied Amelia. “I’ll be home by six tonight. I love you both.”

... -- ...

As they were working out together, Michelle said, “I really appreciate you getting me this new position, Mr. Potter. I couldn’t have kept my position working all sorts of odd hours with Lisa. It seems pretty incredible; regular hours and hundreds of potential babysitters if something comes up, and I get to keep my job grade and pay. Thanks.”

Harry replied, “It was really nice of you to take Oliver’s baby in. My aunt took me in when I was about a year older, I s’pose. I never gave much thought about what it must have changed for her life. Please take good care of little Lisa and give her lots of love.”

Michelle was surprised at the sincerity of his words and vowed, "I will, Harry. I'll do the best that I can. I promise. Get showered, and we'll go see Professor Flitwick."

... -- ...

A half hour later, the three of them were walking up to the front door of the magnificent castle. They met Flitwick and McGonagall in Flitwick's office. Harry noticed that it looked familiar, yet was really quite different than when Professor Dumbledore had occupied it. Flitwick had brought in his own desk chair and modified it to work with the half moon desk that was in the circular office. Harry noticed a portrait of Professor Dumbledore hanging on the wall. The old professor was snoozing in the portrait. The dozens of whirling devices that Dumbledore had kept on different tables were gone, replaced by a variety of photographs that were framed on the wall or sitting loose in stacks on the side tables. Apparently Flitwick had taken them and obviously, he had a critical eye for detail.

"We're here to talk about a few things together, then Minerva will be taking Susan to her classroom to go over the different reading lists and lesson plans that the two of you will be using in learning some charms and transfiguration that should be useful to you both. While you're doing that, Michelle, Harry and I will be penciling in the lesson plans for the various years. We'll meet back for lunch and I'll show you to your quarters for the year. Is that acceptable?"

The three of them nodded and McGonagall left with Susan. When they had left, Flitwick remarked, "I want to thank you both for agreeing to teach defense to the students this year. I received eleven additional enrollment applications just this morning."

"From who?" asked Harry.

"Four were from students whose parents had previously unenrolled them to send them elsewhere and seven were from first year students who hadn't yet responded to their invitation to enroll."

"That's good," replied Harry.

Flitwick gave Harry an appraising look and admitted, "Harry, it's better than good. It's brilliant! At some level, running Hogwarts is a business. Almost all of the costs are fixed, meaning they don't really go up or down much with the addition or loss of a few students. There are staff salaries, potion ingredients, bedsheets, wood for the fireplaces, food for the tables, cleaning supplies and all the other expenses associated with running a school. The loss of a few students places us in the position of having to go to the board of governors, hat in hand asking for gold. On the flip side, the addition of nearly a dozen unplanned students gives us thousands of galleons over and above what we had budgeted for tuition revenue."

Michelle nodded, understanding that Harry was the likely reason for so many parents changing their plans at the last moment. She said, "We'll do our best, Professor. What lesson plans are available?"

Flitwick replied, "You had the classes most recently, Harry. What worked and what didn't?"

Harry suggested, "The dark arts that we're trying to protect people from right now are primarily Death Eaters and other dark witches and wizards. Additionally they should know something about vampires, werewolves, inferi, and bugarts. The littlest kids don't know enough magic to duel anyone or really defend themselves. We can teach them physical conditioning, agility, proper wand handling, and accuracy. As they get older, we can teach them shielding, using physical objects for defense and how to make use of the skills that they are learning in the other classes for defense."

"Makes sense," remarked Michelle. She conjured a white board and pulled some markers out of her bag. She made seven columns and together they identified the goals and objectives for each of the different years. Naturally there was a fair amount of overlap on the practical side since conditioning and accuracy were simply variations of the same subject, be the students twelve, fourteen or seventeen years old. On the academic side, they agreed on text books for each of the different grades.

Flitwick gave them both forms to use for lesson plans, guidelines for grading, house points, appropriate behaviors and the like. Harry

wondered if Snape had ever bothered to read any of the materials that Flitwick had just given him.

Michelle asked, "What will our schedules look like, Professor?"

Flitwick replied, "Students will attend defense, transfiguration and charms twice a week this year with increased emphasis in hands-on practice in all three cases. Arithmancy, runes, care of magical creatures, muggle studies, history of magic, divination and the sixth and seventh year electives were always offered once a week. Herbology and potions will be once a week for two hours at a time."

He continued, "In your cases, your classes are offered in the mornings. Michelle, your classes will be twice a morning with fifth and sixth year on Monday, seventh on Tuesday, first and second on Wednesday, third and fourth on Thursday. Fridays you have off except for a short staff meeting at 4 pm. Harry, your classes will be at the same time, except for different grade levels. First and second year will be held on Mondays, third and fourth on Tuesdays, fifth and sixth year will be held on Wednesdays and you will have seventh years first thing on Thursdays. Should the need arise, you certainly could sub for each other."

Flitwick checked several items off of his list and continued, "Michelle, Poppy Pomfrey has offered to provide care for Lisa during the mornings. Two of the house elves, Dobby and Winky have volunteered to care for her on the afternoons that you are working with Harry and Susan. I expect that any number of the older students could be hired to watch her in the event that you needed to leave the castle for other reasons. We want this to work for both of you and are grateful for the assistance that you have offered to give to the students."

He ticked off another item on his list and continued. "It would not surprise me if either or all three of you brought weapons into the castle. For everyone's safety, it is expected that they will remain locked up, or be in your direct personal possession at all times, preferably well concealed if you are carrying them. The same holds true with the other study materials that I would expect that you would be using in your own work together. Naturally you both have

complete access to the restricted section of the library as well as the staff library and lounge.” Harry nodded, understanding that most of the study materials that he would be using had no business laying around in the Gryffindor common room.

Flitwick continued. “Harry, you and Susan will be sharing one of the two bedroom guest suites on the third floor. It is located by the Hufflepuff wing of the castle. Michelle, you and Lisa will be occupying the two bedroom guest suite next to the Ravenclaw wing of the castle on the fourth floor. Dobby and Winky will show them to you after lunch if you both are able to stay.” Susan gave Harry the briefest of glances, clearly pleased at the news.

“Harry, your instructor salary will be deposited into your vault on the first day of each month. As you are teaching slightly more than half time, you will be considered a full time instructor. As Minister Scrimgeour pointed out, as an Order of Merlin member, you have earned tenured status at the school and are salaried as a full professor. You have certainly proven yourself in your field and Minerva and I are more than willing to help you continue your studies as we promised you. You are responsible for any tuition or fees assessed to your account by the Gringotts representative who will be teaching your estate management seminars, though I am not aware of any specific fees that they may charge their account holders. I am not certain what Poppy will be asking for her time, although I expect it would be in line with the honorarium that she receives when she occasionally teaches at the graduate level at St. Mungo’s, which I believe is 25 Galleons per evening. You and Miss Bones should work that out with her and be certain to keep your account current.”

Harry nodded, and made a few notes as the highly organized professor ticked two more items off of his checklist. He continued, “As you and Ms Bones obviously have a large number of friends who are students at the school, you both are welcome to entertain a handful of students at a time in your sitting room. It is not our expectation that it will become a substitute for either the Gryffindor or Hufflepuff common rooms. You are free to have breakfast or lunch either at the student tables or the staff table. It is our expectation that you will have most of your evening meals at the staff table or in your quarters unless you are out of the castle. You both are granted access to

leave the castle grounds as you need to. Convention dictates that if you expect to be gone overnight, you notify either Minerva or myself. Miss Bones has written permission from her Aunt to leave if either of you are accompanying her as well as Hogsmeade weekends.” Flitwick considered his words for a moment and said, “Minerva was hired immediately after graduation. For what it’s worth, she found it easiest to step right into the professor role rather than try and straddle the fence so-to-speak. It might be easiest if the three of you had breakfast together and both of you ate lunch at the staff table. Miss Bones could have lunch with the Hufflepuffs.”

Michelle put her butterbeer down and observed, “When she started teaching, Professor McGonagall was doubtless a gifted protegee, but she hadn’t been awarded an Order of Merlin or similar recognition for one of a kind outstanding accomplishments. Professor, Harry’s under an incredible amount of stress as it is. If he wants to eat his meals at this table, that one, under a rock, or with the Prime Minister, that should be his choice. Circumstances are isolating him enough as it is. I’ll happily eat any meal wherever you ask, but please give Harry options, not restrictions. Your recommendations regarding not leaving loaded pistols laying out are good ones, though I am licensed by the Queen to do so if I choose, and I shall see that Harry and Susan are too before they arrive. As far as that goes, I’m surprised that there are the house tables this year. My understanding was that you were trying to promote unity among the students. Why not put out round tables for four or ten? Go sit at one and see who is brave enough to come and sit by you. The conversations would be more varied. Put your own scratch on the school, Headmaster. Embrace the technology that is exploding in the world around us. Muggle studies should be teaching our students what’s going on in the world today, not something out of the 1850s. You are without a doubt an expert in your field, Sir and are skilled at transferring learning. You should insist on the same from all of your instructors. When I was a student here, I was taught by a ghost, a Death Eater, and a pureblood teaching muggle studies. Professor, the instructors who were here when I finished a dozen years ago were the best and worst that I’d met, either at the time or since. What I’m saying Sir, is that I think Professor Dumbledore ran the school for so long that no one felt the invitation to question what was being taught or how effective the teaching methodology may have been. You have the opportunity to

prepare the students to be successful for the next century, Professor. Make the most of it”

Flitwick smiled and replied, “That was the most inspired rant that I’ve heard in ages, Michelle. Regarding meals, of course you’re right. Transfiguring the long tables into a dozen rounds each wouldn’t be a problem. Binns needn’t put yet another generation of students asleep. What are you recommending for muggle studies?”

Michelle replied, “Professor, perhaps a fourth of the students have one or more parents who are nonmagical. Hermione’s by example are experts in their field, a dentist I believe, and an oral surgeon. Others no doubt are scientists, carpenters, teachers, accountants, milk men, computer programmers, jet fighter designers, or the like. I expect that any of them would be delighted to come in and talk about their field for a day. It would give them the opportunity to see the castle and help out, as well as go a long way in turning muggle studies into one of the most useful classes offered at the school.”

Flitwick smiled and quipped, “I was talking with Arthur Weasley at the gathering at Amelia’s yesterday. He told me his greatest ambition in life was to understand how an airplane could stay in the air. You have given me much to do this week, and I thank you for pointing these things out. What else can I do to help either of you?”

Harry looked at Michelle and replied, “I think everyone should be checked at the door as they come in to see who is wearing the Mark. Mixing up people for meals should go a long way toward the house unity that the sorting hat is always going on about, and arresting the Marked Death Eaters should go a long way toward discouraging the wannabees. Michelle and I need to work out our lesson plans and she needs to spend some time with baby Lisa. With your permission, we’ll leave now.”

Flitwick replied, “Thanks again to both of you. I’ll see you for lunch on the 31st. Stop by in the mean time if I can help either of you. Let’s go find Minerva and Susan and I’ll show you your rooms.”

... -- ...

Agustus Rookwood had an easier than expected time recruiting, at least at the thug level. As the Dark Lord's Steward, his terms were simple; a thousand galleons upon signing up and two thousand a month paid on the fifteenth. He provided the men with Death Eater garb and a spare wand to use. He set them out in crews of four and gave them a list of a half-dozen targets. Rookwood was a smart man and provided the list of targets that were likely to be undefended. Some of the victims were muggles; others were squibs, or muggleborn spouses of low-level workers. He stayed away from Potter, Diagon alley, Hogsmeade, or high profile ministry targets.

Rookwood had discipline and insisted that the people whom he hired acted within a reasonable confine of actions. He would tolerate no torturing of victims, mutilation, looting or sexual assaults. His idea was to provide each crew with their own list of targets of opportunity and let them run through their respective lists as opportunities presented themselves.

Within each crew he had two Death Eaters and two recruits. At the point when Harry and Susan were being shown the new rooms at Hogwarts, he had five crews in place. He handed each of the crew leaders their lists at the end of the meeting and sent them on their way.

In general he gave them a simple plan; apparate a block away from the victims to avoid tripping any wards, walk to the target site, seal the house, torch it, fire the mark and leave. If the victim lived in a flat, attack them in the lobby as they were leaving the lifts. He didn't want to engage in any set piece battles, rather hit and run operations designed to minimize his own losses.

His goal was to shift the attacks away from Harry Potter centric targets that were either well defended or of low strategic value. Each list contained several names of low or mid-level Ministry workers. Rookwood wasn't really in a position to infiltrate the ministry with the Dark Lord's supporters at the present time, but recognized that most of the real work got done at the lower levels of the organization. He had sufficient financial reserves to operate in that mode for at least a year.

Rookwood was certain that the Dark Lord would be back within a month or so, and be pleased with his actions.

... -- ...

McGonagall was livid. "Mr. Crow, I will not be shunted aside like some old crone. Flitwick got a four page scene and... Furthermore, where have you been, and where did you get that new motorbike?"

But the old Scribe had already left. He knew what was coming next and had to go investigate something that MathiasGranger had reported on.

... -- ...

Chapter Twenty Five – The Death Eaters

Thursday 15 August

Harry, Susan, Michelle and baby Lisa arrived back at their home in Folkestone before Amelia had returned from work. Susan and Michelle watched the infant while Harry looked at the stack of lesson plan forms. Taking a year level at a time, he listed the skills that he wanted each year to be able to perform, then broke them down into smaller segments, which would eventually become weekly lessons. He was grateful that he had some previous experience teaching from the DA group. He was also grateful that he was able to handle the practical aspects of the coursework and would have little to do with the homework assignments.

Amelia returned home at six and they sat down for dinner together. Susan was very animated as she related the day's events. "Professor McGonagall was awesome. She gave us four books to read and wrote out a timeline for the first term with topics. Thanks so much for including me. I can't wait to tell Hannah."

Amelia glanced at Harry, saw his look of concern and suggested, "Susan, maybe we should think through what other people are told about what you two are learning. The professors are volunteering their time to do the special training, much like Harry volunteered his time last year. Quite a few parents might be put out that their children aren't receiving the same opportunity."

Michelle put an end to the conversation by observing, "I expect that Professor Flitwick would be willing to open the program up to anyone that was willing to face Voldemort attacking their home and living to tell about it. Seriously, I doubt that any parent or student will be disappointed by the lessons or instructors this year. There's no ghosts or Death Eaters on the teaching staff. Harry, let's look at the fourth year practical exercises after dinner."

... -- ...

Thomas Felsenthal had made a successful career as a semi-legitimate investment broker. A thin pureblood wizard with longish grey hair, he joined the Death Eaters comparatively late in life, having

retired from his everyday business straddling the fence between the magical and the non-magical worlds. Felsenthal may not have had the same reasons for joining Voldemort's followers as Malfoy or Lestranger; he found it to be a business opportunity rather than carrying some type of ideological or pathological vendetta against muggles. Felsenthal was surprised when he received the message from Rookwood effectively calling him up for active duty earlier that morning. He had always operated primarily in the capacity of money laundering and investing rather than operations.

Felsenthal was one of a handful of Voldemort's associates still living that had originally known Tom Riddle. Their first caper together was a rather ingenious case involving polyjuice potion. Riddle had marked the squib, who had been a client at Borgan and Burkes. As the squib hadn't trusted the Gringotts goblins to keep his papers and valuables safe, Felsenthal was tapped to effectively hold a premature estate sale with the two of them operating with a 70/30 split. Naturally Riddle worked the deal to his advantage, but each of the wizards had netted several million galleons for little more than a month of work.

Nearly fifty years had passed when Felsenthal read about Riddle's re-emergence. Thomas had yet to divide the proceeds of their last co-operative effort when Riddle had disappeared in the early eighties. Unlike many of the others, Felsenthal wasn't really surprised to have read the stories printed immediately after the Tri-wizard tournament regarding the alleged return of he who-must-not-be-named. Fortunately Felsenthal had taken the rumor seriously and had liquidated the funds that he'd been keeping for Riddle and had them ready for him, meeting his ravenous demands for funding in 1995.

Thus the seventy-year-old wizard found himself in the company of Rookwood and two other wizards outside the home of Dedalus Diggle at 10:30 pm. The four men walked the half-mile from the apparation point to Diggle's home.

Diggle had made a living in a similar fashion as Felsenthal, though officially in the capacity of a solicitor. Diggle's career track record may have been several shades lighter than Felsenthal's, but they were both shades of gray, cut from essentially the same cloth. The

differences between the two wizards weren't so much in their methods as the clients who hired them.

This was the second raid that Felsenthal had made with the Death Eaters. The other had been over twenty years ago; effectively a loyalty test of some sort. That had been a similar raid with Voldemort, Rookwood and a young wizard who had just finished school, Barty Crouch Jr.

Thus as Harry and Michelle were discussing table arrangements for the students with Professor Flitwick, Felsenthal had been visited by Rookwood, who gave the message, "The Dark Lord has need of your services. Come with me."

Felsenthal knew that Rookwood's demand was non-negotiable and four hours later found himself in the outskirts of Crawley, not a mile away from the Grangers' home. He had been given the easy enough task of quietly casting the coloportus charm on the door and each of the windows on the back side of the home within a span of less than twenty seconds.

Diggle was in his study at 10:15 that evening reviewing papers for a minor contractual settlement when he heard a blast in the fireplace. There was no doubt in his mind what was happening. He reached into the desk drawer and grabbed the emergency portkey that Dumbledore had made for all of the Order members. In the five seconds that it took Diggle to remember the password, Rookwood had completed casting the anti-apparation and anti-portkey wards around the home. The old solicitor was disappointed, but not surprised that it failed to activate. Recognizing that he had a very limited window of opportunity to react, Diggle picked up his cell phone and pushed the buttons of the only emergency number that he had memorized – Amelia Bones.

Unfortunately, Bones was already on the phone taking a call from Anna Daily regarding an attack that had just taken place north of London. Diggle raced up the stairway of his home and cast a Reducto charm on one of the outer walls.

The charm blew a plate size hole through the lath and plaster wall and the sight that Diggle saw through the hole was sickening. He

could see flames leaping up through the hole, and acrid smoke began rapidly pouring into the bedroom. Frantically, Diggle cast the charm again and again until the hole in the side of the home was large enough to leap through.

By then, the Mark had been cast and the four attackers had already vanished into the night.

Diggle was in a very bad situation and he knew it. He quickly cast the bubble head charm and considered his options. He couldn't apparate away, or use a portkey. He no longer owned a broom and the hole in the side of the house was nearly thirty feet off the ground. Taking a running start, he leapt through the hole through the searing flames.

... -- ...

As Diggle was getting ready to exit his burning home, a similar situation had occurred thirty miles away. The Ministry forms clerk, Susan Florman who Harry had accused of being related to a flobberworm had been targeted. Unfortunately, the Ministry bureaucracy had never seen fit to provide emergency self-protection planning for the lower level employees. There was no form that could save the career administrator from a sealed, burning house.

Death Eater Randal Hardman led his team of new recruits away from the burning building. As the three men and their female accomplice turned their heads to watch their work, there was an explosion inside Florman's attached garage that collapsed the burning wreck of a home. Hardman laughed and handed the bottle of Ogdens to the young killer walking beside him. As the sound of the emergency sirens grew nearer, the four killers quietly apparated away in the growing darkness.

... -- ...

Randi Estling-Bell returned to her girlfriend's home after a night out with the girls to find her friend's home in flames. Her old roommate Sandy Hill's car was parked in the driveway. Panic set in and she failed to notice those responsible slip away unnoticed to report back to Rookwood. Unable to breach the raging infernal and desperately hoping that her friend was still out with her boyfriend, Randi pulled

her cell phone from her purse and called her boss. It hadn't occurred to her that she had been the target and her old roommate had died horribly in a tragic case of mistaken identity.

... -- ...

Amelia was notified at 11 and again at 3AM. She had desperately hoped that the setbacks that the dark side had experienced lately would result in a quiet period. By breakfast time it had become apparent that the dark side was alive and well, and intent on evening the score a bit.

Connie Hammer and Anna Daily visited a total of eight crime scenes that evening. The similarities between the murders far outweighed the differences. It would take some time to find the connection between the victims, as some were Ministry Administrators, while others like Diggle and Sandy Hill didn't fit the pattern. Hammer had no way of knowing that Diggle had earned his spot on Rookwood's list due to his involvement in the Order and Randi previously rented house space from Hill.

Hours later as Hammer and Daily were finishing their paperwork they were surprised to receive a visit from an equally tired looking Amelia. As Connie handed Bones the reports and photos, Amelia accepted them and gave both investigators a heartfelt thanks, saying, "Well done both of you. Minister Scrimgeour is calling a short press conference in an hour that I'd like you both to attend, then please go home and get some sleep."

Anna nodded and asked, "Has there been any word from St. Mungo's regarding Mr. Diggle?"

Amelia gave her a sad look and replied, "Yes. He's not expected to live the day. We need to brief Scrimgeour. We should go now."

... -- ...

An hour and a half later, Scrimgeour was fielding the final few questions. Rita Skeeter from the Prophet asked, "Minister, since there were eight separate attacks that we've been told about that took

place within... Skeeter glanced at her notes and finished saying, "five hours, how many Death Eaters do you think were involved?"

Scrimgeour had been expecting the question and wanted to put the best face on his reply. He glanced at the timeline that Daily had prepared and responded, "There is only confirmed evidence of two of the attacks overlapping, so there could have been as few as two small cells operating simultaneously; more likely there were three or four."

Skeeter accepted his answer and asked, "Minister as a follow-up question, do you think there was any relationship between last night's attacks and the reported destruction of the dementors from earlier in the week. Also was there any evidence that he who-must-not-be-named was present at any of the attacks?"

Scrimgeour glanced at Hammer and Amelia replied, "All evidence points to the conclusion that all of the dementors that previously resided within the U.K. have been eliminated. We have significant evidence that Voldemort was seriously wounded on the evening of Friday 9 August and hasn't been seen since, so to answer your question, we do not believe that he was present at any of the attacks last night. We do believe that Voldemort directed that the attacks take place and either personally selected the victims or approved the list.

Scrimgeour concluded the conference, saying, "No more questions at this time. Thank you for coming." He wanted to stick to the facts. Death Eater attacks were certainly tragic for the victims, but did not cause the widespread panic of a Voldemort sighting or rogue dementor attacks. The last few months had certainly proven that the ordinary Death Eaters could be fought, ambushed, captured and sent through the veil. He was all but certain that they would be eliminated before the bounty money pool or the public's patience would run out.

As she was leaving, Skeeter pondered Scrimgeour's seemingly offhand response to her questions. *No evidence... we do not believe... points to the conclusion.* She was reminded of the old adage, "dead men tell no tales." Scrimgeour had presented physical evidence of the dementors demise, where-as snapping a wand that was said to have belonged to he who-must-not-be-named did not

present the same degree of assurance. Rita was fairly certain that the evil monster would still be deadly even if he were casting spells with a toothpick! It was obvious that he had personally planned the raids, even if he hadn't led them himself. While she wanted to be optimistic, the fact remained that the Death Eaters successfully carried out eight of eight separate murders last night with no losses on their side.

... -- ...

The pattern of the murders that Hammer and Daily failed to see was not lost on the career administrators. The normally quite employee cafeteria was a veritable beehive of speculation and debate. While last night's attacks had focused on the low level employees, the supervisors had no reason to feel secure, resulting in very little real work getting done.

Similar speculation was happening at the castle. McGonagall was quietly discussing the attack with Tonks and Lupin. Minerva shut off the WWW that had carried the morning press conference live. She pondered the difference between last night's attacks and the one on her favorite transfiguration student.

Just then Moody walked in and announced, "Diggle died a few minutes ago."

Remus pondered the incident as he knew it for a moment and observed, "I wonder why he didn't use his portkey to get away?"

Moody replied, "I looked the area over. There was evidence of an anti-apparation ward."

Tonks remarked, "They must have figured some way of getting anti-apparation and anti-portkey wards up fairly quickly and quietly."

Remus speculated, "They must be getting some help from somewhere."

Moody replied, "Old Rookwood probably gave them lessons. They're not that hard to set up if you only need them to last a few minutes."

... -- ...

That afternoon, Amelia held a meeting with the evening shift of the Auror team. Like the morning meeting, the facts of the cases were presented. After they had been going a while, an idea came to Anna. She stood and blurted out, "They did the same thing at the Granger residence on Friday, except..." she checked her notes for a moment and continued, "Hermione noticed them and blew their back door off, giving them a way out."

"Or in," added Connie, playing off her partner's observation.

"True," blurted Tonks, "But Hermione was probably targeted by Voldemort himself. The Death Eaters that were out Friday were all experienced killers. He can't have hundreds of them laying about waiting for a call-up."

"Practical Exams," nodded Amelia. "They seal the residence and torch it. They can't wait around unless it's a remote location. They're not going after locations that are likely to be properly defended."

Mikelson and Paulson were having an ongoing conversation in the back row. Amelia gave them an annoyed look and inquired, "Do you have something useful to add Cadet Mikleson?" The overlarge somewhat awkward cadet looked down and shook his head.

His friend Paulson gathered up his courage and blurted, "Director, Ma'am, Mikleson was just suggesting that a cadet or two stay at homes of the different administrators for a few nights on a sort of protective detail or ambush. I was telling him that there are too many admin grade ones and twos to cover everyone. Sorry for the interruption, Ma'am."

Anna sorted through her logbooks for a moment, gave Bones a meaningful look and nodded. She looked again and said, "Most of the most recent attacks fit except for... Mr. Dedulus Diggle and... Sandy Hill."

"Diggle was friends with the Professor," suggested Tonks alluding to old Order."

"Sandy and I were roommates," said Randi. "I used to live there before I got married."

“January,” recalled Connie. “You would have been listed there in last year’s employee directory. The Death Eaters must have a copy.”

... -- ...

The afternoon edition of the Daily Prophet carried the headline *Death Eaters murder eight. Ministry fails to react*. Scrimgeour was pleased with the news that Amelia had delivered when she met with him at five that afternoon. The reality was that they could set up a half-dozen ambushes, or they could inform the too hundred or so administrators that there was evidence that they were specifically being targeted. Given the very short time that the Death Eaters were on site, he knew that Amelia had nowhere near the manpower to station an Auror at every grade one’s flat and agreed with Amelia’s plan to stage a half dozen ambushes

... -- ...

Rookwood was pleased to learn that each of the teams had completed their missions without suffering any losses. He had traveled to Riddle’s home in Blackpool several times in the last few days to report in to his master, but the Dark Lord hadn’t been there any of the times. He would simply keep operating as he had been directed, varying his targets and check in several times a week.

... -- ...

Back at Blackpool, the lanky readhead sat with his back against the brick wall of his room. Unable to smell his own stench anymore he silently pondered his fate. He had no way of knowing that at that moment his best friend was relaxing on a floatie touching fingers with his girlfriend.

... -- ...

“Mr. Crow, I have something for you.” McGonagall stood and locked the door to her classroom. You have made a career here by *generally* providing rapid updates and controversial endings.” She gave him a sharp look and began taking objects out of a wooden crate that she kept beside her desk. First she carefully picked up a Sperry made handgun and set it on her desk. Next she carefully placed a five-foot

bloodstain on her desk. She pulled a polished 50 caliber match round out of her crate and placed it on the desktop. Finally, she pulled a jeweled long sword out of the crate, unsheathed it and gently set it on the desk.

The old scribe looked at each of the objects, fondly reminiscing about the fun that he'd had with them. He looked into the crate and also saw a miniature fuel truck, a set of Mizuno irons, and several shrunken gray BMWs, but failed to understand the old crone's point.

With suddenness that he didn't believe possible, she rapped her wooden walking stick on the chair beside him and shouted, "You have provided us with no bona fides in this story, Mr. Crow; no proof, no smoking-gun, no head-on-a-platter. People enjoy certainty, tidy endings, and closure, Mr. Crow. It appears that you have intentionally denied them with a proper clim.. er, ending to your story."

She picked up a carefully written card that read Portkey 7137 Witowsmp.

Thinking about his nearly frozen steel horse, the old scribe realized that he had a few chapters remaining and should get back to work.

As he left he hummed the refrain from an old song, *You can't always get what you want* and closed the door behind him.

... -- ...

Chapter Twenty Six – Back to the Beach Chapter Twenty Six – Back to the Beach

Sunday 18 August

Like a summer heat wave, the war had visited the Abbott household and lingered. The dementor attack earlier in the month would always be the topic of nightmares. Ben was unlikely to ever forget the hatred that had emitted from Voldemort's red eyes as he launched a wave of destruction in courtroom one or the utter despair of being lifted off the ground by a sightless dementor. In contrast, watching the morning surf felt like a rainbow visible while it was still lightly raining.

Today was Hannah's sixteenth birthday. Their little family was alive and intact, so Ben and Becky intended to make the very most of the occasion. They had invited a fairly large group of friends over to celebrate her birthday. It was the first family event following the attack at their home. Becky got up early and began setting out the beach chairs and towels with a passion that hadn't been there in June. She came back in and saw the owl waiting by the kitchen window. It was a copy of *The Quibbler*. She dropped the coins into the owl's pouch and glanced at the headline.

Hogwarts announces staff changes

Headmaster Filius Flitwick announced the staff changes for the upcoming term yesterday. Horace Slughorn, accredited Potions Master has agreed to return for a two-year contract. Slughorn, 78, will resume head of house responsibilities for Slytherin house in addition to teaching potions.

Diane Trueteel has accepted a two-year contract to teach History of Magic replacing the spectral Professor Binns. Trueteel held a similar position at the Salem Institute for eleven years prior to taking a sabbatical to study magical history of the American Southwest. She finished Hogwarts in 1975 where she held the position of Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain for two years and holds an advanced degree from Cambridge.

Headmaster Flitwick also announced that Defense against the Dark Arts would have two exceptionally qualified instructors this year.

Flitwick signed one-year contracts with DMLE Hitwitch Michelle Wood, who is on loan from the Ministry, and Order of Merlin First Class recipient, Mr. Harry Potter. Wood finished Hogwarts in 1992 and had begun a distinguished career as a DMLE Hitwitch, having been decorated several times this year. Mr. Potter's record speaks for itself.

Headmaster Flitwick was quoted saying, "I believe that each of these changes demonstrated our commitment to providing our young people the best possible education in the best possible environment that Britain has to offer. I would encourage any parents who have eligible students to register their child immediately if they have not yet done so. Flitwick announced that he would accept late registrations up to Monday 2 September for the coming term.

Becky handed the newspaper to Ben and commented, "It looks like Flitwick is making quite an effort to getting the school year off right."

Ben replied, "I hope so. I never cared for Fudge's interference, but Dumbledore had made some very questionable decisions regarding staffing over the last few years."

She nodded in agreement, looked a bit further and saw another article.

Headmaster Flitwick announces scholarship program

Headmaster Filius Flitwick announced yesterday that he would personally assist any student who lacks the means to attend Hogwarts this year due to financial hardship.

The article went on to describe the process that a student or parent could use to receive aid for the upcoming term.

She handed the paper to Ben who looked at it for a minute and nodded. "That was really generous of him."

Ben agreed, "He made good choices announcing the staff changes and probably shamed the Board of Governors into some sort of matching program. Either way, there are lots of new reasons for parents to send their kids back to school this year, and he's done everything that he could to make it easy on those that can't afford it."

... -- ...

By noon all of the guests had arrived. Becky had invited about fifty people and everyone came. There were a few more Hufflepuffs and several fewer Gryffindors than had been in attendance for Harry's party a few weeks ago, but it was essentially the same group. Terry Boot teased Susan a bit about Harry teaching at school, but somehow it came off as gallows humor. Hannah defended him saying, "Potter's blasted bits and pieces off of Voldemort in two straight fights; he could offer to teach at the Auror Academy and everyone in attendance would take notes. So what if he's in our year? Would you rather have Umbridge back?"

Conceding defeat, Boot mumbled, "I didn't mean it that way. Come on Ern, let's get some butterbeers and play volleyball." McMillan gave Susan a look clearly indicating an apology and followed his inept friend to the cooler.

Hermione had been invited and was talking with Sarah Fawcett and Kevin Entwhistle. Sarah from their year in Hufflepuff asked, "Did Harry really get hit with a... killing curse?"

Hermione nodded and replied, "Hannah's mum saw it. Bellatrix Lestrangle hit him after she hit Neville with the Cruciatus curse."

Kevin replied in awe, "The paper said that he blew her head off a week later."

Anthony and Justin listened in rapt attention as Hermione nodded and replied, "To my knowledge, everything that *The Quibbler* has printed about Harry in the last year is true."

Justin commented, "Merlin, I had no idea he was that good. So who's left in Slytherin?"

Entwhistle replied, "Just Vaisey and Higgs in seventh; Bulstrode, Tracy Davis, Daphne Greengrass and Zabini are in sixth. The others have left, gotten arrested, blown up, or sent through the veil."

Sarah remarked sarcastically, "Snape was quite the moral rudder. I met Professor Slughorn two weeks ago. He was pretty friendly when

he was trying to get an eyeful of my bits. I hope he keeps his mind on teaching and being a fair head of house.” She was a very attractive young woman who didn’t see much humor in being leered at.

Kevin remarked, “Me too. Mum is letting my little sister Christina come to school when she read about Harry teaching class and Slughorn coming back. She and our neighbor were going to home-school Christina and her twins Gretta and Emily.”

Hermione remarked, “They’ll be much better off at Hogwarts. No one could match the resources of the library. I’m certain that Professor Slughorn has excellent credentials”

Sarah asked, “I thought you were dating Potter. What happened?”

Hermione took a breath and replied, “We’re best friends, Sarah. We still are. We never dated, even though we’ve spent a lot of time together. It’s been a full time job helping Harry with his adventures and keeping Ron’s grades up... Susan and Harry are good together.” She spoke her words with conviction, but she failed to make eye contact when she answered the last part. She excused herself walked inside a few seconds later.

After she left, Entwhistle admonished Sarah saying, “Smooth job there. Why didn’t you ask her how it felt to blow up Death Eaters while you’re at it?”

... -- ...

As Sarah was grilling Hermione, Amelia, Becky and Ben were sitting at a small table in the shade under a tree by the surf discussing the recent events. Admittedly passionate about the issue, Ben argued, “Rufus can’t be *allowed* to keep executing prisoners like he’s been. Amelia, you know that it’s *wrong*.”

Bones quickly cast a privacy charm and calmly replied, “Of course his actions circumvent normal policy, but we really don’t have the resources available should Voldemort direct a fifty Death Eater assault against Azkaban or the holding cells. Obviously he’s taken some losses lately, but it was proven the last few nights that their

fangs are still sharp. They're not exactly taking the high side by burning non-combatants alive in their homes."

Ben rebuked, "The clerical staff is in a panic. Half are ready to resign or go on leave; the other half are screaming for protection. Yet the fact remains that prisoners have right too."

Less calmly, Bones replied, "I agree Ben, but the fact remains that we currently only have some sixty-seven licensed Aurors. Divided by four for shifts and week-ends that's about Seventeen on duty at any given time; and that's before vacations and injuries get factored in. We tried incorporating the Cadets into duty last week at Azkaban. You read about the results. They're still too green. Rufus is doing the best that he can with what we have available. Fudge let the headcount drop for years with his hiring freezes. We simply can't fix it overnight." Becky nodded at her words.

Ben replied, "I'm not arguing about the cause of the problem, Amelia. We both know that the man was a worthless ponce. I'm simply saying that provisions have to be made to safely accommodate the prisoners. Maybe we should go outside for some short-term help. If Azkaban is too expensive to defend in terms of manpower, maybe we should use the holding cells on a long-term basis."

Bones disagreed, replying, "We saw how poorly defended the ministry building is two weeks ago. It was designed to be accessible to the people, not be a prison. We simply can't choke off the floor access system and herd everyone through the visitor entrances and still expect any work to get done. Riddle can have fifty Death Eaters and send them all out at once resulting in a fifty to fifteen disaster. We simply can't have every Auror on call twenty-four hours a day seven days a week. We're forced to keep regular hours, he isn't. The short of it that we can't keep Voldemort out of the holding cells as we currently run the facility."

Ben practically pleaded, "The war has clearly gone our way this last month. The worst must be over. We can afford to hold prisoners."

Sadly Amelia shook her head and replied, "Think about it, Ben. Harry's been directly responsible for every success we've had this summer. His quick thinking at the Department of Mysteries and

Olivanders ultimately netted the Ministry millions. By all rights, the courtroom attack should have been a massacre. With a bit of luck, Voldemort could have taken down our government in one stroke, but Harry rallied everyone to fight back. I could have been killed twice over this summer. The dementors could have brought absolute panic and chaos to our world. Those successes aren't trivial, and I'm *not* minimizing them, but we have a *long* way to go. If Rufus has changed being convicted of being a Death Eater into a death sentence and he can sleep with it, I won't object, at least for the time being." Ben clearly wasn't convinced.

Amelia recast the privacy charm and admitted, "Ben, I'm as sorry about the Weasley boy as anyone, but we have no evidence that Riddle has forced *anyone* to join his side. Everyone has been given a trial; we aren't going to repeat the mistakes that we made with Sirius Black. I can't speak about Diggle, but Susan Florman and Randi certainly weren't combatants. Susan wasn't going to stop Voldemort by handing him a form." Amelia realized that she was going off on a rant, took another sip of wine and apologized, "I'm sorry for going off like that Ben. It's been a hard summer. I apologize."

Her old family friend, sighed, "None needed Amelia; you know that. For the time being, can we at least agree to disagree? We can look at it again in a few months."

Amelia nodded, raised her glass and toasted, "To better times." The three finished their wine as friends.

... -- ...

Fifteen minutes later, Susan came in to use the loo and heard the muffled sound of Hermione sobbing. She gently knocked on the door and asked, "Hermione, are you okay?"

In a little voice, the distraught teen replied, "No."

Susan considered the situation for a moment and asked, "Should I get Harry?"

In a slightly louder voice, Hermione replied, "No."

“Can I come in?”

There was silence for a few seconds, followed by, “I just need to be alone for a bit.”

In a gentle voice, Susan suggested, “Hermione, I need to use the loo for a tic. There’s a spare bedroom across the hall. Please wait there and we’ll talk in a few minutes. Okay?”

The door cracked open and Susan held out her hand. Hermione folded into her outstretched arms and they hugged for a long moment.

Susan sat Hermione on the floor with her back against the bed and returned a few minutes later with two bottles of butterbeer and a plate of sandwiches. She closed the door and sat down on the floor facing Hermione.

For half an hour Hermione explained her life’s frustrations, her feelings of guilt about Ron’s abduction, the attack at her home, concern about Neville and her parents limited understanding of her world. Susan was a patient listener, giving nods of encouragement from time to time, but never interrupted. Finally Hermione got to the crux of the matter as she blurted, “I killed...” She never finished as Susan drew the distraught teen to her. They wept in each others arms for a few minutes, beginning the cleansing process in each other’s guilt along the way.

... -- ...

Sunday 18 August

At breakfast the next morning, Amelia and Susan were up first. Amelia mentioned, “I noticed that you were spending a lot of time with Hermione yesterday.” She left it as an open-ended statement and waited to see if her niece would offer any information.

Susan hesitated a moment, considering if she was breaking a confidence, and replied, “She’s had a really stressful summer, and hasn’t had enough support. I think she really appreciates having a girlfriend to talk to.”

Amelia nodded and observed, "I've always been grateful that Becky and Hannah have been there for you. I'm glad that you are taking the time to get to know Hermione better. She has a bright future ahead of her." She considered her words for a moment, smiled, and added, "Come to think of it, so do you."

Susan beamed at her and replied, "Thanks, Auntie."

Amelia nodded and asked, "So what are your plans for the day?"

Susan replied, "Mrs. Weasley invited Harry, Hermione and I over for lunch. Hermione and Harry had spent part of August there the last several years. I suppose she's really lonely this year."

Amelia looked at her niece for a moment and replied, "I'm certain that she is. Doubtless she'll ask if there is any news regarding Ron. In a word, none. I've asked Connie to question people that they pick up. So far, nothing has been learned. My expectation is that no one outside of those who were in the courtroom raid knows where he is, and until we pick one of them up, or Harry is able to finish off Voldemort, nothing will change. The only thing we've really done is to telegraph that he has value to us."

Susan smiled grimly and thought, 'Nothing like putting a bit of pressure on him.'

Amelia added, "Smidgen can watch baby Lisa while you're gone. I know you two can take care of yourselves, but please humor me and take Michelle with you."

Without any argument, Susan replied, "All right. We'll be back before dinner."

... -- ...

Three hours later Harry, Susan, Michelle and Hermione arrived at the Weasleys. Susan watched with great pleasure as Mrs. Weasley threw Harry into one of her bone-crushing hugs. Hermione nodded and whispered, "She probably was the first adult that Harry remembers getting a hug from."

Susan gave a little smirk and replied, "He's had no shortage lately."

Hermione briefly met Susan's eyes, nodded and replied, "I'm going to say 'Hi' to Ginny." She walked off.

Susan went back to Harry, who had previously mentioned the kindly mum's habits. Therefore it was no surprise that Mrs. Weasley easily slipped into "Molly mode," stuffing Harry and the other guests with every sort of food as they ate lunch together.

Ginny was quiet as they ate. Whereas Harry had easily had the best summer of his life, the youngest Weasley was ending the worst summer of hers. She missed having Harry and Hermione stay over for several weeks, and everyone had been devastated with Ron's abduction.

Molly danced around the unspoken subject as long as she could and finally Susan announced, "I asked Auntie about Ron this morning. Connie has had the Aurors questioning everyone that the pick up. So far, there hasn't been any word about him. She thinks that just the few people who left the courtroom with him know where he's being held." Molly nodded in heartfelt appreciation.

Hermione, who had read every book on abductions and hostages that she could get her hands on, added, "In non-magical situations, sometimes a mediator is used to communicate back and forth. I realize that the payment of ransoms is illegal and that Harry has specifically been told not to try that, but it might help."

She glanced at Harry, who gave a polite nod. In reality, he believed that Amelia was doing everything that was practical for his friend and was reluctant to have anyone go around her.

Desperate for any ideas, Molly asked, "What are you thinking of, Dear?"

Slightly unsure of herself, Hermione replied, "Perhaps Mrs. Parkinson..."

Michelle, who had just come in to join them for lunch, listened to the conversation. As they went back and forth she noticed that neither

Harry, nor Susan had added much. She didn't think that there was a chance that Minister Scrimgeour would ever release the teen who had been charged as an accessory in eighteen murders in any sort of exchange and would most likely be disinclined to hold her prisoner very long if convicted. As the trial was scheduled in a few days, there wasn't much time to act.

After a teary farewell, with another round of hugs, and feeling like she was rapidly running out of options, Molly sat down at her kitchen table and carefully wrote on a clean parchment. *Dear Mrs. Parkinson. I don't think it was either of our intentions that our children would become involved in this war...*

After she was finished, she carefully sealed the letter and sent the message.

... -- ...

"Welcome back, Mr. Crow. It's good to see you again." The old scribe noticed that there were fewer scrolls on McGonagall's desk than the last time that he'd been in. He waited for her to say something and wasn't disappointed. "Now that the nonsense over death-sticks has died down, I hope that you and the other scribes can get back to business. Looking at his report again, she frowned and demanded, "Exactly what are your intentions, treating Miss Granger so poorly?"

For once the old scribe agreed with the deputy headmistress about the good feeling of handing in another report, and ignored the fact that she gave him an unhappy look regarding the size of his scroll. He walked out of the castle into the sun and considered making another journey with his steel horse back to the bear tooth pass. As there were a few more chapters to write, and perhaps another tale to relate, he decided to wait until the next report had been filed in a few days. He also needed to contact his fellow scribe, the Chem Prof.

As he was leaving, the old scribe recalled that McGonagall was reading a scroll by the scribe AndrewsQuill entitled Dark Lord Rising. He nodded in approval and wondered how she would like it.

Chapter Twenty Seven - Stumped

28 August

The day before Susan and Harry were scheduled to move back to Hogwarts, Amelia amused herself as she watched the teens go their separate ways for the day. At Harry's suggestion, Susan had made plans to spend the day at Hannah's house. She announced, "I'll be home by five." Adjusting her top in front of Harry, she coyly asked. "What are your plans for the day, Professor Potter?"

Realizing that there was no winning reply, Harry rolled his eyes and announced, "I think I'll look in the woods and see if I can find some birch to start my wood collection. If that doesn't pan out, I'll just read a bit or swim in the pool. I'm hoping for a quiet day before we go back to the castle."

Susan remarked, "It's been the best summer of my life. I'm really glad that you came to stay with Auntie and me. Noticing the concerned look that had flashed on his face, she quickly realized that Harry might have mis-interpreted her words. She pulled him into a very soft hug and whispered, "I love you, Harry. That will never change."

When she finally let him go, he replied, "Thank you, Ms. Bones. It's been far and away, the best summer of my life too."

Baby Lisa gurgled and gave a determined look. Susan smiled and commented, "It seems that all of the witches in the house love you, Harry. Baby Lisa gurgled again as if to agree.

Harry, who was standing nearer to the infant observed, "You might be right. Personally I think she was trying to give me a new weapon to use against Voldemort, Poo Yeaw."

Susan shook her head at the pathetic attempt at humor and commented, "Lucky for you that Smidgen will make her right again." She quickly landed a kiss on his nose and said, "I'll see you later this afternoon. Have a nice day." Following her Aunt, she threw a pinch of floo powder in the fireplace and was gone.

... -- ...

After Amelia and Susan left, Michelle asked Harry if he had an extra copy of Moody's book that they were planning on using as the fourth and fifth year text. Harry replied, "I loaned it to Ginny, sorry."

Michelle nodded and said, "No worries. Lisa and I will go over to Florish and Blotts for a bit and pick one up before the Parkinson trial. Do we need anything else?"

Harry smiled at the two of them and replied, "I think we're fine, thanks. I'll just go out and look for some wood pieces until you two get back." Amelia had suggested that he and Susan stay away from the courtroom hearing. She had promised to let them know the results as soon as they were announced.

Michelle momentarily reverted into guard duty mode, gave a slight frown and replied, "Maybe Smidgen could go with you." Harry was about to argue that he didn't need a minder, but deep down knew that it was safer. Instead, he nodded.

She had never lost her apprehension from being surprised so far from the house by the dementors and Bellatrix, but let it go without saying anything else. Harry walked up to his room to get his canvas bag and the little bow saw that Olivander had given him. Michelle was just leaving when he walked back down the stairs. Holding Lisa, she waved and announced, "We'll be back at eleven. Using the floo, they were gone seconds later."

... -- ...

While the others were gone, Harry took a walk through the woods that bordered the fringes of the Bones property at Welshpool looking for straight birch branches 1.5 to 2 inches thick as Mr. Olivander had suggested. As he found them, Harry carefully cut the branches with the bow saw that the master wandmaker had given him. Harry cut each branch into 20 inch lengths and put them into his canvas bag after carefully inspecting each piece. As he walked through the woods, his scar twitched occasionally. After a half hour it had grown into a dull headache.

As the morning wore on, Harry's canvas bag grew full and he began to discard a few of the pieces as he found better ones. He was quite

careful to pass on pieces that looked like they would contain soft spots, bug damage or anywhere the paper thin bark had been damaged. Too soon he had 24 pieces and decided that he'd found enough for one morning.

As Michelle wasn't due back for another half hour or so, Harry decided to work on strengthening his spellcasting. He saw five large tree stumps nearby and decided to try his reducto charm on them.

Boom!

The first one literally exploded after Harry solidly hit it using his Freedom feather wand.

... -- ...

The asp awoke from its deep slumber on the warm day. It had been coiled up inside a rotted tree stump healing for the last week. Sensing danger from the vibrations caused by the nearby explosion it slowly uncoiled itself and began slithering out of the ground under the rotted tree.

... -- ...

Harry looked behind him and saw Smidgen the little house elf shuddering with fright. He bent down and she dashed into his arms like a small child. Harry assumed that the loud noise had frightened her and, with as much grace as a teenaged boy could muster, patted her on the back. After a minute he asked, "Smidgen, could you go back to the house. I think Amelia might be fire calling in a little bit. I'll finish up here and be back in a few minutes."

Quickly agreeing, the little elf nodded and vanished with a soft pop.

... -- ...

Boom! Boom!

Harry blasted two others at the same time. He had put full force into his spells and the results were visually spectacular if nothing else. The two stumps had literally ceased to exist!

... -- ...

Riddle knew that he was in no position to fight Potter at this time, having no arms and no wand if he attempted to revert back to human form. His bleeding had stopped in the last few days, but without any food or blood replenishing potion, he was very weak and doubted that he could apparate away. Just feet away from Potter, but unseen, the wounded adder began to slither away, ever so slowly.

... -- ...

Immediately before the trial Molly saw Mrs. Parkinson walk into the ministry atrium. They had exchanged several notes in the last few days. The two women stood next to each other and stared into each others eyes for a minute. In a very soft voice Mrs. Parkinson said, "I asked around last night. Ron is alive, fed daily and under the highest orders not to be harmed. I haven't personally seen him, and don't know his whereabouts, but I thought you'd want to know."

Tears running down her face, Molly nodded and in a choked voice replied, "Thank you... Patti. In a very sincere voice, she added, "Good luck today."

The two women nodded to each other and walked into the courtroom.

... -- ...

Elsewhere at the ministry things were slowly coming unraveled. There had been three more attacks last night, each of them coincidentally targeting a member of the building maintenance crew. The remaining two maintenance men had each handed in their resignations by the time that Rufus had arrived in the morning.

Rookwood's strategy of slowly dismantling the Ministry from the bottom up was both highly demoralizing and effective. The entry level and second level staff workers had no official protection and were scared witless that they would be next. Surprisingly, it was the murder of Susan Florman, the forms administrator that made most of the clerical staff nervous. Florman had hardly said a word to anyone, and certainly had no known enemies. She came from a minor pureblood family like the Weasleys, except with no political positions. Given

Riddle's stated stand on blood purity, everyone expected that she would have been spared. She simply had been employed in a nearly invisible position quietly working for the last three years for the little money that she was paid.

The fact of the matter was that Rookwood had targeted the administrative departments and the maintenance department based on the employee directory that he had acquired. His attack strategy was to go after a 100 percent success rate rather than highly visible targets and incur losses. In his case, it was more of a personal vendetta against the organization where he had previously worked rather than blindly following the Dark Lord's vision. In this case, their two agendas conveniently coincided.

As Potter was blasting stumps, Rookwood was just finishing handing another six four man crews their list of targets.

... -- ...

Boom! Boom!

Harry blasted the fourth stump with both wands. From a distance it was impossible to recognize that there had ever been a tree or a stump where it had previously stood for years.

Next to the last stump was a rock made of sandstone. It was about the size of an office desk. Emboldened by his success with the tree stumps, Harry decided to see if he would have similar success with the rock.

Sandstone is a fairly porous rock; much softer than the other types of stone that Harry might have chosen to practice on. Unfortunately, when Harry was blasting the stumps, his spells completely overpowered the inherent strength of the stump, and everything blew backwards into nothingness. Relatively speaking, the big chunk of sandstone fought back. In short, Harry was standing far too close to the stone.

Boom!

Crack!

The sandstone block was cleanly hit and exploded into a dozen basketball sized pieces, hundreds of golf ball sized pieces and thousands of smaller pieces. Some of the golf ball sized pieces flew backwards and one hit Harry squarely in the forehead.

Harry went down even as the blood was flowing down his shirt.

... -- ...

Riddle the adder was equally unlucky. A chunk the size of a basketball landed inches from the retreating snake, rolled a bit and crushed the bottom third of the serpent, firmly pinning it to the ground. The badly wounded snake writhed on the ground in sheer agony.

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As the Riddle snake was pinned to the ground, Rookwood and the other 40 or so Death Eaters who wore the Mark felt the pain in their arm as the normally solid black tattoo on their forearms changed to purple then red and slowly back to black.

A few mistakenly assumed that they had been summoned and apparated to the Dark Lord's hideout in Blackpool. Others who were closer to Voldemort assumed that the Dark Lord was extremely angry about something and from past experience elected not to go anywhere near headquarters unless specifically summoned.

... -- ...

Patti Parkinson was shocked when she saw her daughter being dragged into the courtroom. She hadn't been cleaned up or healed from when she had been manhandled during her apprehension and was missing four teeth. Her filthy robes were stained with her own blood. There were about fifty spectators in the courtroom in addition to the five judge panel selected from the Wizengamot.

The hearing was interrupted several times by shouts from the spectators, almost all of which were relatives of those killed at the previous trial or off-duty aurors who had lost friends. In common, they all were there to demand their pound of flesh.

Originally there for the same motive as the others, Molly watched as the surprisingly short hearing ended with a guilty verdict for Pansy. Deep down, Molly knew that the execution of a sixteen-year-old girl would not bring the others their fathers, sons, daughters or husbands back regardless of her guilt. Somehow she knew that the death sentence that had been passed a minute before would translate into a death sentence for her own son.

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Between the blood loss and the blinding pain, Harry's body shut down and the teen passed out within seconds. A large, ugly lump was already beginning to form on the teen's forehead.

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Back at Folkstone, Hannah and Susan were having an unusually serious discussion. Augusta Longbottom was maintaining a no visitor policy regarding her grandson, Neville. Hannah had not been allowed to visit her boyfriend since the attack at the courtroom, and there had been no news that his condition had improved any. She felt guilt about returning to Hogwarts on the first without him.

Though both Susan and Hannah's parents held positions of great authority, visitation at St. Mungos was completely dictated by family preference, and to date, no one had been able to budge Augusta's rigid viewpoint.

Finally Hannah asked her lifelong friend, "Do you suppose that if Harry asked her, she'd change her mind?"

Before Susan could respond, Becky came out of the house, found the teens and in a worried voice called out, "Susan, you'd better come in for a minute."

... -- ...

McGonagall read Crow's parchment with rapt attention until she reached the end. At that point she turned it over, obviously expecting much more and in the sternest possible voice admonished, "Mr. Crow, you have got to be kidding!"

By the time she looked up the old scribe was already gone in search of the fabled yellow stone. Silently cursing him, she penned him a note, knowing that he would receive her owl and waited for his response.

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Chapter 28 – The Slide into Chaos

Tuesday 1 October

Filius Flitwick scanned the *Daily Prophet* as he ate his breakfast. It had been an unusually hectic first month as headmaster. Harry Potter had been badly injured a few days before class was scheduled to begin, there were several more late enrollments, the ongoing debilitating losses at the ministry were wearing and his own inability to devote the time required to do a really proper job while continuing to teach was frustrating to the career educator. Perhaps strangest of all was unusual lack of news about Voldemort.

Flitwick glanced at the three stories on the front page.

Three Auror Cadets Found Murdered - Ministry fails to stop the killings

Second year Auror cadets Mike Bradley, Mike Paulson and Paul Mikleson were among those murdered last night under the Dark Lord's orders. The Dark Mark was visible at each of their residences.

This brings the September death toll of Ministry employees to 19. DMLE Director Bones was quoted as saying, "On behalf of the decent people of Britain, I express my deepest sympathy to the families and friends of those who were killed and on behalf of Minister Scrimgeour, I want everyone to know that the Aurors are doing everything that can possibly be done to stop the killings."

Flitwick wondered how long Scrimgeour and Bones had until they received a call of no confidence. He turned his attention to the next article.

Ministry Announces Execution of Mass-Murder Accomplice

The ministry announced that the execution sentence against convicted murder accomplice Pansey Parkinson was carried out yesterday. Parkinson, two days short of her seventeenth birthday had been convicted of being an accomplice in the 7 August courtroom battle, which left eighteen innocent people dead. Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour was quoted as saying, "Bringing slime like

Parkinson to justice is a continued demonstration that the ministry means business in the fight against Voldemort."

Momentarily remembering the teen in happier times, the diminutive professor read the third article.

He Who-Must-Not-Be-Named seen recruiting in Romania

Based on translated testimony from recently convicted Death Eater recruit Ruben Smirnoff, the Dark Lord has expanded his recruiting outside Britain and well into Eastern Europe. According to testimony released from last Friday's trial, Smirnoff was quoted as saying, "The Dark Lord came to me and offered a job." Smirnoff was captured last week in relation to the murder of ministry employee Michael Finigan. He was not wearing the Dark Mark, but admitted to participating in the killing.

However, there is some controversy regarding the testimony. Long time courtroom spectator and retired Hogwarts ghost, Professor Binns was reportedly heard telling an unidentified ghost that the correct translation should have been, "The Dark Lord's man came to me and offered a job." Smirnoff who is currently on the other side of the Death Veil was unable to comment.

Flitwick was among a growing number of light side magicals who were beginning to question Scrimgeour's practice of quickly executing convicted prisoners. Flitwick had known Binns for many years when he was living and respected his skills and interests, even if he didn't share Binns' obsession with the goblin rebellions.

Just then, Harry arrived and sat down next to him. Flitwick felt guilty for not spending more time with the teen who was quickly becoming Hogwarts's favorite professor. Filius asked, "How did your first month go, Harry?"

After his experience with Croaker, Harry had come to recognize the difference between eating with his pals and a business breakfast. He put down his fork, swallowed, wiped his mouth with his napkin and replied, "Fine, Professor." At Flitwick's stern look, Harry amended his reply to, "Really good, Filius. The students in defense classes are honestly doing better than I'd hoped. I think the separation between

the bookwork and the actual practice is beneficial to everyone. The sessions that Susan and I are taking are fantastic. We're learning so much." A moment later, Harry considered that from a certain perspective, Flitwick was new to his job too, and asked, "How are things going for you?"

Flitwick nodded at Harry's words. Potter had such a good attitude and was very easy to work with. Filius replied, "We got the last two new students settled into Hufflepuff house yesterday. Pella and Rudy should be in your third year class tomorrow. In total we had six additional enrollments since you were injured." Thinking of the subject, Flitwick looked carefully at Harry and observed, "It looks like your head wound is fully healed. Is there any lasting pain?"

Harry replied, "No. Poppy did a great job, as always." He had a pensive look on his face for a few seconds and added, "In fact, I haven't felt in pain in my scar since I'd woken up."

Unsure of the deeper meaning, Flitwick nodded."

... -- ...

At the same time that Flitwick and Harry were having a leisurely breakfast, Bones and Scrimgeour were having a much less pleasant meeting. The *Prophet* article was all but damning regarding their inability to stop the Death Eater attacks. Objectively the paper's criticism was spot on. There had only been one arrest in the last two weeks.

Scrimgeour put his fork down and announced, "As of this morning, we now have 314 employees, including all of the new hires but not counting the Wizengamot. The day I took office, we had 350. At this rate, between the employee resignations and the murders, we'll be the only two left in the building by Christmas. To be honest, I'm surprised that the Wizengamot hasn't called for a no-confidence vote."

Amelia said nothing, waiting to see if Scrimgeour had more to say, or was just thinking out loud.

Scrimgeour felt a bit guilty as he rubbed his forehead. He knew that he was venting, yet it was a very serious conversation. He glanced at Bones for a moment, both understanding the gravity of the situation. They didn't have much time to turn things around.

Amelia didn't like the option that she was going to present. In fact, as a witch, aspects of it sickened her, but as the teen that had suggested it had mentioned, desperate times call for desperate measures. She reached into her bag and pulled out a folder. She opened it and replied, "I received an owl from Hermione Granger over the weekend." She took out Anna Daily's investigative report regarding the Death Eater attack at the Grangers the continued, "Of the Death Eater assassination attempts in the last two months, two were successfully defended, the one at my home and the one at the Granger residence."

Scrimgeour hadn't moved or made a sound. A fairly large part of him was ready to just give up.

She knew that Rufus was still hurting regarding the murder of his wife, daughter and son-in-law, but knew that she had to continue. "Rufus, I freely admit that I'm here today by a combination of good luck, the grace of a phoenix and the skill of Professors Flitwick and Potter, but the Granger case is worth looking into."

She met his eyes and continued, "Two dentists, one armed with a shotgun defended their home until help was able to arrive."

Hearing no argument, she continued, "We were able to respond immediately because Dr. Emma Granger called Anna Daily with her cell phone."

Scrimgeour waited patiently while she checked her notes. Continuing, Amelia noted, "The Death Eaters were probably on site for no more than two minutes before the call was made, and no more than four minutes in total until Anna and Connie arrived. In the meanwhile the two dentists killed one of the attackers and dropped another."

Many of the details were news to Scrimgeour, who had assumed that the Granger witch had more than held her own against the

perpetrators. In fact, after the initial contact, Hermione had been half buried, under a wall of broken plaster.

Bones checked her notes again, flipped a page to find what she wanted and added, "According to the information that Hermione sent me, the shotgun that her mother used cost about a thousand pounds which comes to about two hundred galleons. The cell phone was about half of that, though there is a usage fee. Anna pays twenty galleons a month and her phone is always available for use." She checked her notes for a moment and added, "The shotgun shells are fairly inexpensive, and they apparently come in different sizes."

Scrimgeour nodded. Right now he had more gold than ideas, and Bone's plan made sense. He asked, "So, what exactly are you suggesting?"

Bones replied, "I think we should do three things this week. First we procure the equipment for every ministry employee. Second, we allocate a day or two so each employee is comfortable using their equipment. Third, we visit employees's residence and designate a nearby apparition point and post them in the auror waiting room so we can respond as quickly as we receive the call. It won't save everyone, but for the most part, we're not dealing with Voldemort's top people anymore. They can't all have the fighting skills of Belatrix or Dolohov."

Scrimgeour considered her words for a full minute and asked, "Is this the best plan to actually protect the employees, or simply something to steady their nerves?"

Amelia replied, "Yes." Smiling, she added, "I had a discussion with Harry a few weeks ago about planning vs. simply reacting. This will give everyone a plan, and even if it doesn't work every time, will certainly inflict damage against the other side. We can't station a detail in every neighborhood, but we can keep a six to eight person response team ready and give families reason to believe that they can protect themselves and that we will be there within minutes of being called."

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment and Amelia concluded saying, "Beyond that, we can keep recruiting, and try to hold off the Wizengamot."

Encouraged by her idea, Scrimgeour asked, "Any success on filling the third class yet?"

Amelia shook her head and replied, "Less than none. I had another resignation last night from the second cadet class."

Rufus considered the plan and lack of options for a minute and announced, "Make it happen."

... -- ...

At lunch that day, Flitwick called a short staff meeting to discuss allowing Hogsmede weekends for the students, or other alternatives. He invited everyone, but primarily was looking for Harry and Michelle's input. Their outspoken ideas regarding eliminating the house tables seemed to have been a great success. The walls between the houses were as low as he could remember, particularly demonstrated by the first years, who seemed to have formed a bond of their own that was much stronger than any house affiliation.

Michelle got to the point, "It's not that everyone might not get out of the castle, into the village, have fun, buy some things and get back safely, but what's the reward to match the risk? We can't watch two hundred students who wander through the village. Voldemort could send a team of twenty wizards; they each fire off a spell or two and be gone again in fifteen seconds. Even if we got lucky and gave as good as we got, we'd have a tragedy on our hands."

Sprout pointed out, "For a thousand years, trade with the villagers has kept Hogsmede going. It's been a great symbiotic relationship."

Michelle replied, "That said, we invite each of the shopkeepers to pick a day a week and have one or two load up their wares into a wagon on their day and set up shop from three to eight in the afternoon. That way, the first and second years can see them too." Winking at Flitwick, she added, "And if Professor Potter would elect to make a 50 galleon

donation to Madam Puddlefoot, I expect that she would set up shop and even bring over her pink tablecloths on his behalf.”

As expected, Harry turned beet red. Hannah and Susan had related the story of Harry’s one and only visit to the lurid tea shop. Shaking his head in misery he replied, “Maybe if I made a 500 galleon donation, I could get her to stay in the village.”

Everyone laughed in good fun. Handed lemons, they could make lemonade.

... -- ...

At the same time that Harry was getting grilled about tea shops, Ben, Becky and Amelia were having lunch. Becky mentioned, “We got a letter from Hannah today. She said that the classes were going very well and that Harry was everyone’s favorite Professor. She also mentioned that Susan and Harry are getting along better after they kissed and made up. She must have been pretty mad at him for wandering off alone in the woods.”

Amelia smiled at the news and Becky asked, “How’s Michelle doing?”

With less of a smile Bones replied, “I think the first couple weeks were devastating. She had offered to tender her resignation when Harry was injured. When he finally woke up, and mentioned that the pain had literally been blinding, everything that she’d been through seemed to really get her down.”

Becky replied, “It’s a good thing that you found him when you did.”

Amelia nodded, “Smidgen was so upset when I’d firecalled after the Parkinson trial. It was lucky that she knew where he was.”

Ben asked, “What was he doing out there again?”

Smiling, Amelia replied, “Collecting sticks and blowing things up. Normal teenage boy stuff, I suppose.”

Becky shook her head at the “boy behavior” and asked, “How is little Lisa doing?”

Amelia pulled out a picture and passed it around.

... -- ...

That evening, Arthur Weasley's co-worker, Evan Perkins, Wilkie Tycross the apparition instructor and Nymphadora Tonks' father Ted were murdered in their homes.

The next morning, there was a call by Wizengamot Elder Tiberius Ogden, whose wife just happened to be Pansey's mother's sister calling for a meeting to convene in two days to ask for a vote of no confidence against Scrimgeour and Bones.

... -- ...

McGonagall rubbed the stress from her face. She looked over a few sections and began what was obviously going to be a rant over the content. "Mr. Crow..." It was either an amazing demonstration of self restraint, or a display of holding her breath, the old scribe couldn't tell, but nearly a minute went by before she continued by asking, "Yes or no?"

The fact of the matter was that the assistant headmistress had hit the crux of the story on the head a few scrolls ago when she asked about less definitive endings. He knew that many times in life, the clean ending did not exist and people often misinterpreted what they saw.

Before leaving to find his steel horse, the old scribe noticed several reports on McGonagall's desk from The Black Iris. Glancing at them, they appeared to be quite interesting.

As he rode off, he hoped to hear from Mike regarding that pint that they had talked about.

... -- ...

Chapter 29 – Ten Firetraps

Friday 4 October

While the Hogwarts students were coming down to the great hall to have breakfast, Augustus Rookwood stopped by the large manor in Blackpool. Ogden's call for a no-confidence vote had given Rookwood and the rest of the Death Eaters just the motivation that they were looking for. The ex-ministry employee was certain that Bones and Scrimgeour and all of the others whom he perceived as having wronged him would be gone, or out of the way by the end of the month. He had a large operation planned that would leave the mansion empty for the evening and did not want to leave it unprotected. Being an expert at warding, he spent an hour casting the Fidelius charm on the grounds near the main building and a separate charm on the main home itself. As the others came in, he told them the location of the grounds, so all of the marked Death Eaters could only see the servant's quarters and the grounds themselves.

He met with Lisa and asked her about the condition of the prisoner. She replied, "He's well enough, but is always hungry. It seems that he demands to be fed four times a day."

Rookwood laughed. He had been a bottomless pit as a teen too. He asked, "Anything else?"

"Alecto Carrow killed the house elf after it spilled tea on her."

Rookwood nodded and replied, "I'll buy another one tomorrow. Narcissa had a few extra that were for sale after she left. Anything else?"

Lisa replied, "No. Almost everyone picked up their pay envelope. What should I do with Smirnoff's?"

Rookwood was about to tell her to put it back in the chest, but changed his mind and replied, "Keep it. You've done a good job the last month." He looked her up and down for a moment and added, "You've earned it. The Dark Lord will be pleased with your work."

Rosier replied, "Thank you, Sir. When will the others arrive?"

Rookwood replied, "About seven. Get some rest today. It will be a long night. I'll be back by six."

... -- ...

As Rookwood was leaving Blackpool, a lorry pulled up to a run down section in Central London. The driver checked his address and noticed an ancient looking man step out of a tailor shop and asked, "Are you delivering to MoM Ltd?"

The driver replied, "Aye, Gov, but you'll have to sign for all of this. It says that it is for the attention of Amelia Bones."

The old man displayed his identification which consisted of a photo ID and a gold M1-6 badge. He signed for the crates and watched as the delivery man unloaded them onto the sidewalk. The delivery man commented, "That's quite a load, Gov. Would you like me to help you bring them inside?"

The old man smiled and replied, "No thank you, good man. I'll manage. Have a good day."

The deliveryman nodded and closed the back door of the delivery vehicle. As he was driving off, he slowed the lorry, gave a last look in his side mirror to see if the old man was really okay and was surprised that the sidewalk was empty! A moment later he'd somehow forgotten about the incident and drove off to his next stop.

... --...

At eleven, Rufus took the nearly unprecedented action and ordered the Ministry building closed to the public for the rest of the day. Five minutes later, he called a meeting of all the employees in courtroom one. It took ten minutes or so to pack everyone into the courtroom that was only designed to seat 250, but by the time Amelia stepped onto the main floor and shut the doors, everyone was there and the room was silent.

As they had arranged, Anna Daily rang Amelia's number and the small handset, which she had previously turned up the ringer as loud as possible, made a loud noise. Speaking clearly, she answered, saying, "Amelia Bones." A moment later, Bones spoke into the cell phone again and said, "I certainly will."

She looked up and saw Connie by the door and in a loud voice asked, "Connie, could you open the door? Anna called and she and Minister Scrimgeour are standing just outside in the hallway."

As scripted, Connie opened the door and the two walked in. Rufus walked to the main floor, stood by Amelia and greeted everyone, "Good morning."

Most of the people muttered a greeting back, but morale was obviously quite low. As they were exchanging greetings with Scrimgeour, Anna walked up to the jury area in the balcony. She had previously transfigured several of the juror seats into a comfortable sofa, a board into the wall of a small home, complete with a glass window and had two life sized wooden figurines wearing Death Eater garb standing twenty feet or so on the other side of the glass.

As most people were looking at Bones and Scrimgeour no one noticed Auror Wilson and Master Auror (retired) Alastor Moody step up on the balcony. Wilson pointed his wand at the wall and shouted *Incendio* just as Moody fired *Avada Kedavra* at the window shattering the glass, but going nowhere.

The audience looked up in fear. Moody and Wilson had flattened themselves on the floor so no one could see them. Anna picked up her cell phone and in a calm but loud voice called, "This is Anna Daily. My home is being attacked by Death Eaters. I'm home alone." She then picked up the shotgun that was on the floor by the couch, aimed at the first figurine through the window and fired. The number 0 shot, approximately the size of BBs ripped a hole through the window and knocked the figurine over. A moment later, she fired the lower barrel at other figurine with similar results. Connie walked over, cast a spell to put out the fire and another to circulate the air.

The noise in the closed room had been deafening, but all who had seen it would remember the ten-second demonstration for a lifetime.

Less than a fourth of the witches and wizards in the room had ever seen a firearm discharged before and less than a tenth had seen a cell phone in use. Most of those who had were Aurors.

Scrimgeour cast Sonorus and called, "Everyone please sit down. The demonstration is over for now."

Half a minute later, Anna walked down the stairway, carrying the Holland and Holland 12 gauge over and under, a box of shells and her cell phone. She placed them on the table in front of Scrimgeour and Bones, then stood off to the side by Connie, Moody and Wilson.

Scrimgeour looked at the crowd. "The last time anyone was gathered in this room was the sixth of August. The Death Eaters saw fit to sneak in like cowards and attack the good people of the wizarding world. Some of our friends and family were killed that day, though in fact, we gave as good as we got."

There was a smattering of applause, but it didn't catch on.

Scrimgeour continued, "Since then, the last month hasn't gone so good. Nineteen of our side were murdered, most of them were killed in their own homes like Auror Wilson and Master Auror Moody demonstrated. Nineteen good people died because they had no way to call for help and weren't sure how to fight back."

Someone in the back shouted, "No more!"

Scrimgeour looked out to the audience, shook his head and smiled for a moment at the enthusiastic cadet. He called, "Auror Cadet Nib, please come up to the table."

Nib, walked up to the table, silently questioning if his idea of an unsolicited reply was really so great. Scrimgeour commanded, "Cadet, pick up that cell phone and pull on the little wire. Daily walked over and whispered in his ear for a moment. Scrimgeour corrected himself, "Cadet pull on the antenna wire, press the button that has a 1 on it then press the talk button."

Nib did as he was directed and Anna suggested, "Nib, hold the phone like this and talk into it at a normal inside volume."

Anna picked up the other phone on the table that was ringing and answered. There wasn't another sound in the room as everyone watched with rapt attention.

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Meanwhile, Harry was having a busy day. Michelle had been called back to the ministry for the day. His portion of the defense classes had been exhausting and he had offered to fill in for the day for the Friday afternoon open office hours that Michelle normally kept from one until three. It allowed students to walk in and ask questions or get additional assistance in a subject.

The first quidditch game would be played the next day. Harry would most likely miss it because of the scheduled Wizengamot meeting. He wondered if Ron was still alive and his thoughts drifted to the last game that they had played in together, nearly a year ago. Momentarily he grew angry that Dumbledore had allowed that hag into the school and had taken so many good things away.

... -- ...

Headmaster Flitwick looked out of his classroom window and saw Hagrid leading the cart filled with Hogsmeade goods as it came up the front path to the castle. This afternoon would be the first of the Hogsmeade merchant visits - this one from Rosmerta of the Thee Broomsticks pub. He glanced out the window from time to time as Hagrid unloaded the 32-gallon kegs with ease and the stacks of crates of bottles while Rosmerta and her helper arranged chairs around tables in the courtyard. Based on all of the cases of bottled butterbeer, apparently Rosmerta was trying to make a go at the take-away business. As Flitwick finished his last class, he decided to go see if they needed any help.

Flitwick truly enjoyed the publican's company. When she looked at him, she saw a brilliant, kind man, not a boring schoolteacher trapped in a dwarfish body. As he was making his way into the courtyard, he silently cursed his luck as he heard McGonagall call, "If you have a minute, Filius."

... -- ...

About 4:30, Hermione found Susan and Hanna visiting in the hallway. She asked the two teens if they and Harry wanted to go have a butterbeer.

Hannah thought about asking Megan or Ernie to come with, but something in Hermione's voice indicated that this would be a business meeting, simply having a beer with friends.

When they got there, there were no more empty tables. Hermione took a few sticks out of her bag and in a moment transfigured them into a varnished high top table and five chairs. When she was done, Harry smiled and proclaimed, "These are great. Thanks!" The others nodded and they sat down.

Rosmerta watched the teen easily perform magic that, if the truth was known, was well beyond her own ability. She walked over to them, smiled and asked, "What would you like, Ducks?"

Harry glanced at everyone at the table and replied, "We'd all like a butterbeer please." As Rosmerta was returning, he noticed Dennis Creevey digging deep in his pocket to find a few sickles for a butterbeer for himself and his girlfriend. Feeling a bit guilty, Harry waited until Rosmerta brought back their butterbeers and in a low voice, said, "I'll pick up the tab for everyone for the night. Just let me know how much it is in the morning."

Rosmerta winked at him, nodded and walked off.

Hermione knew that a lot of the young witches and wizards weren't given much money to spend when they were sent off to school and in a soft voice commented, "That was a really nice thing to do Harry. Thanks." She knew that he could easily afford it, but didn't want to make a big deal of it.

"No worries," replied Harry. Looking at her for a moment, in an equally quiet voice, he asked, "Did you get your owl yesterday from Randi?"

"About tomorrow?" asked Hermione. She saw him give the smallest nod and nodded herself. She wasn't positive that he wanted to turn it into a table discussion in front of Susan.

"I don't think he has the votes," announced Harry. "According to the announcement that I read, Ogden would need to convince 32 other people."

"He doesn't need to," suggested Hannah grimly. "If he's anywhere close, he can demonstrate that Minister Scrimgeour and by implication, Amelia don't have the support to go forward with, and all but force a resignation."

"But they're doing everything that they can to win the war," pleaded Harry.

"I don't think that this is about the war, Harry," suggested Hannah. "I think it's about Pansey. Ogden was her uncle, and to him it's become personal. Dad pleaded with the Minister to stop sending the prisoners through the veil, but he wouldn't stop."

"How many people did the Death Eaters kill after Riddle broke them out of Azkaban?" asked Harry, thinking about how Bellatrix killed Sirius.

"It doesn't matter to Ogden," countered Susan.

"True," agreed Harry, "but it matters to Mrs. Longbottom."

Minerva stood a ways away as she watched the next generation of the wizarding world wrestle with realities that were anything but black and white.

... -- ...

Scrimgeour sat in his office watching the employees leave for the day. They had kept everyone in the courtroom for the day. Everyone had used the cell phone and been able to fire a few shells from their shotgun and reload it. Shells, bullets - they both did the same thing, but had different names – it was highly confusing. Arthur Weasley had practically driven him nuts when he tried to take the cell phone apart, but finally everyone had the basics down and were issued their new equipment.

Amelia mentioned that the phones would need new batteries after a few days, since most of the employees' homes didn't have electricity to somehow re-power them, but if he was still in office in a week, they would resolve that too.

Scrimgeour wasn't really worried about Ogden's call for a no-confidence vote; frustrated would be closer to the truth. Certainly the war had gone for the worse in the last month, but Rufus felt confident that in time, things would come back again.

The air in the building still smelled from the smoke that the shotguns gave off when fired. It would probably linger for days, as there was no maintenance crew to get things cleaned up. It was different from the usual smell of the mostly underground building. It smelled like... he couldn't think of the term; instead, he poured himself a glass of malted whiskey for dinner. There was no real reason for him to return to his home. He would wait out what would most likely be his last night as minister down in the Auror room.

... -- ...

At Blackpool, the Death Eaters began arriving just before seven. Rookwood saw that everyone had arrived. The Fidelius was obviously working because no one asked where the large manor home was. Lisa had set up wooden picnic tables and had set out some stew, bowls, loaves of bread and urns of hot tea. The food may not have been to everyone's taste, but no one complained.

There were all forty-five Death Eaters there, divided up unto their crews of four or five each. For the night Lisa would pair up with Rookwood and the two newest recruits, Lewis and Reggie. She hated the way Reggie leered at her as if she were a common muggle bint, but in the spirit of helping Rookwood and her master, kept her thoughts to herself.

With ten killing teams out that night, each with two homes targeted, a total of twenty families of those friendly to the current administration would feel the Dark Lord's wrath. Rookwood estimated that fifteen of the twenty homes would be occupied by the intended targets when the Death Eaters came to call. He had read the *Prophet* the day before referencing Ogden's call of no confidence. Rookwood

estimated that striking such a large blow would finish off Scrimgeour once and for all.

He was careful not to announce the plans prematurely. He was confident that there were no spies within the organization, but there was no need to take an unnecessary risk. At the same time there were no longer any true spies remaining within the ranks of the ministry employees, though there were still a handful within the Wizengamot who remained loyal to the cause. Effectively, both sides were blind to the others plans.

He had selected targets from all over the UK, in part because of who they were, or to pay off a previous vendetta and in part because of logistics. Most witches and wizards were severely limited in how far they could apparate at a time. Even those few who could go a hundred miles tired after two or three rapid apparitions. As such, he knew the Aurors would waste most of their time and energy that night responding to attack scenes where the Death Eaters who committed the killings were already gone and the intended victims already dead. It was his hope that the Aurors ended their shift exhausted and completely demoralized.

Rookwood was confident that with the fall of Scrimgeour and Bones, a new MoM could be called that would hold more of an ear to their message. He expected the Dark Lord to come back by the end of the month, December at the latest, and be pleased with the progress. Besides, with Scrimgeour's publicized policy of a death penalty for convicted Death Eaters, there really was no other course of action available to them. In effect, whether or not the Dark Lord was still alive, Rookwood and the others had nowhere else to go.

... -- ...

In the gathering darkness, Ron Weasley felt very alone. Lisa had brought him a large bowl of a very nice stew, some bread and a large glass of water for dinner. He hadn't seen the house elf who usually brought the meals and took away the trays each day.

... -- ...

After they had eaten, Rookwood stood and began. "Crew one. Lewis Nott. It is time to strike back after the murder of your brother. Your first target will be of Goblin relations. Cresswell lives in Grimsby. Here is his address. A break between the ministry and Gringotts will help the Dark Lord have access to more of his funds. Choose your second target from the list that you have, based on whoever is closest."

Nott and the three others at his table nodded and began planning their dark mission.

Rookwood continued, "Ronald Avery. Your actions tonight can help destabilize those who took your son away. Alastor Gumboil works in Bones' office as an administrator. Here is his address in Dover. He will be weak whereas your crew is strong. If the opportunity presents itself, the Abbotts live nearby in Folkestone." The elder Avery gave Rookwood a grim nod and began planning their attack.

"Mrs. Flint and Mr. Felsenthal. Your crew's will target Phillip Manky of Magical creatures in Linconshire. Here is his address. Two of the others on your list live nearby."

Rookwood continued, "Alecto Carrow, young Terrance Higgs on your crew has done very well in the last weeks. Show him the anti-portkey ward and he will be ready to lead his own team next time. Your crew's first target is Gilbert Wimple who lives in Westmorland at this address. His work in experimental charms has been especially bothersome to our cause. Your second target is only a mile or so away." Rookwood saw Higgs' excitement as he glanced at his notes.

"Thorfin Rolle, your crew's first target is Wilber Plonker. Plonker lives in the west end of London at this address. Plonker is a lab technician who could hurt our future plans. It will be good to hear your success story when we meet again."

"Lyle Borgin, Miles and Bletchly shall team up with you tonight along with one of our new friends, Lector. Your target works in the improper use of magic office, Anita Quim. Her spellwork could be used to detect us while we attack and she needs to be eliminated."

After he was done, he heard one of the Death Eaters from a nearby table mutter, "Who doesn't?"

Rookwood shook his head a bit and continued, "Rolondo Lestrangle, it is time for you to exact your pound of flesh from one in the ministry who has done you much wrong. Arthur Weasley and his brood of blood traitors have long tried to thwart us. He lives in Ottery St. Catchpoll in Devonshire. Be certain to approach his home with care, as Dumbledore had placed anti-apparation wards around the area before he died."

"Lisa Rosier, you will lead our two newest recruits, Gordon and Tucker to the Isle of Wight. The meddlesome Investigative Auror, Anna Daily's mother lives there. Anna may well be living there as she wasn't at the last address that I had for her. I will accompany you. This is the address. There is an Auror Cadet who lives a few miles away that we can look up later in the evening."

Rookwood checked his notes for a moment and continued. "Rachel Mulciber, Bole, Derrick and one of the more experienced recruits, Skyy will accompany you tonight. Your first target is Cutbert Mockridge, also from the Goblin Liaison office. Mockbridge lives in Leeds at this address. You have another target living in Leeds from your list. Good hunting."

Gibbins and Pucey, you will lead these two recruits, Beck and Busch to hunt for a very important target. Malfalda Hopkirk lives at this address in Surrey. Do not stay on site longer than you need to, but it is necessary that you confirm your success."

After the targets were announced, each of the crews went back to their individual tables to discuss their individual assignments. Rookwood had made certain that each of the crews had a least one person who was skilled in setting the anti-apparition and anti-portkey wards to keep the intended victims from fleeing.

... -- ...

About nine, Hermione and Hannah waved at Harry, hugged Susan and kissed her on the cheek for luck, as the two went back to their suite for the evening. They would all have a busy day tomorrow.

Cormac McLaggen eyed Hannah and Hermione still sitting at the table after Professor Potter and Susan got up to leave. He was

certain that they would be pleased that he took the time to notice them.

McLaggen had a natural arrogance; fueled by a dozen of the free butterbeers that Rosmerta was giving away for the night. Objectively, Cormac was more than a little intoxicated. For some inexplicable reason, he believed that it added to his charm.

After he hit on the two witches, Hannah was ready to hex his bits into peanuts, but surprisingly, Hermione offered to escort him back to the Gryffindor tower instead.

Hannah shook her head, and called, "I'll see you tomorrow at seven for breakfast. Goodnight Hermione. Goodnight, Barmpot."

... -- ...

At nine Rookwood opened four bottles of Single Malt and passed them around with the toast, "We will deliver justice in the Dark Lord's name, until he returns to reward us for our work." Some of the men drank deeply from the bottles as they were around the group, others had just a sip in the spirit of camaraderie.

Rookwood re-summarized his instructions, "Attack your primary targets between eleven and midnight. Set up your anti-apparition and portkey wards, douse the chimneys, fire the house and put imperturbable charms on most of the windows, blast the others and flame the inside of the dwelling. Fire six to ten incendios each to get a big fire going quickly. Stay close enough to the entrances to stop anyone who tries to break out until the fire has become fully engaged. Fire the Mark just before you leave. Get off the premises within five minutes. Be at your secondary targets by one. We'll meet back here the evening of the fifteenth."

Whether the Death Eaters personally believed in the cause, or simply were there for the money or the killing, they were ready. Shortly after ten, the teams began to leave.

... -- ...

Back in their suite, Harry and Susan were watching the moonlight out of their window in the darkened room. She loved having him hold her.

As they were sitting there lost in their own thoughts, Susan whispered, "I wonder how Auntie's doing?"

Harry wasn't certain to say. He was positive that the Aurors were trying so hard, but according to the papers and letters that they'd received, it wasn't always enough.

He whispered, "It will work out." They sat in comfortable silence as Harry massaged Susan's beautiful breasts in the moonlit room.

The silence in the room was broken by the words, "It's okay Harry, I want to."

... -- ...

McGonagall was livid. "Mr. Crow, you have violated every standard of decency that we have worked so hard to put in place. You are certainly aware of our policy regarding cliffhangers. The department of care and mistreatment of the less fortunate will certainly be contacting you regarding your description of the mistreatment of that poor house elf." She was obviously just getting started, so the old scribe decided to ride off into the sunset as soon as she turned her attention."

Crow noticed the latest report regarding Growing up Granger from one of the lesser known scribes, Mattd12027 and asked McGonagall about it.

As she glanced at it to refresh her memory, he slipped out the door.

... -- ...

Chapter 30 - Firefights

Friday 4 October

10:45 PM

Scrimgeour watched as sixteen aurors milled about in the break room that they had hastily converted into an operations room waiting for the phone to ring. Normally most of them would be out on patrol, looking for shoplifters or moving around, hoping to notice some crime in progress. Tonight, they were waiting to respond to distress calls from their co-workers. The aurors were tired of being called in after the fact, only to find everyone at the scene already dead, having died a horrible death. They were looking to be paid their pound of flesh.

On the wall there was a map and a chart with each employee's name, address, apparition co-ordinates and a brief description of their home. As a system, it certainly could be improved upon, but given the short amount of time that had been available to set it up, it was much better than expected. Auror cadet Tom Fawcett and Mad Eye Moody were acting as dispatchers for the evening.

Fawcett was manning the cell phone they had everyone's speed dial set to. Anna had stressed to him the importance of getting the information as quickly as possible, writing it down, as well as the time and having Moody make the decision as to how to handle the situation.

In an emergency, they also had the phone numbers of all of the off duty Aurors. Amelia had given Moody instructions that she was to be contacted if there was more than one attack during the evening, regardless of the time.

... -- ...

11:01

Dirk Cresswell lived in Grimsby, some 150 miles north of London in an old single-family cottage outside of town. He hadn't heard Nott and the other Death Eaters arrive or set the wards. He was sitting in his

overstuffed chair rereading the instructions for the new equipment that he had received.

Lewis Nott's brother Peter and his son Theodore had been the more fanatical of the Dark Lord's followers of the family until their deaths. Lewis, his wife Martha and their adult children Bruce and Rhonda all supported that cause and had taken the Mark. Like the Malfoys, Lewis had insisted that his family maintain a respectable facade and they all worked in a seemingly legitimate magical herb distribution business. Prior to receiving the call from Rookwood that his brother had been killed, most of their involvement had been done by providing financial support to the cause.

Much like Neville, Bruce, who finished Hogwarts along with his sister in Neville's third year, had been a hit and miss student in his various subjects. Charms was not his long suit. While Lewis was setting down the anti-escape wards, Bruce's job was to douse the inside of the chimney to put out the fire to prevent the occupant from using floo powder. Bruce's aim for the jet of water was fine, but he produced more of a squirt than a gush, thus alerting Dirk before his fire finally went out.

Pocketing a handful of the shells, Dirk blew out the candle in his room, picked up the Holland and Holland and made the call to the ministry.

... -- ...

11:02

"Aurors office, this is Fawcett."

"This is Dirk Cresswell out in Grimsby. My home is being attacked."

"Aurors are on their way." Fawcett clicked the off button on the phone as Moody dispatched four Aurors. Just for safety's sake, Moody called Amelia and told her of the attack.

Seconds later, the phone rang again. It was Gumboil in Dover, some 75 miles south east of London. Moody dispatched another four Aurors and told the remaining Aurors to start calling the off-duty Aurors back in.

... -- ...

Back in Grimsby, Cresswell saw a flash as Lewis and Martha began firing incendios right outside his windows. Carefully aiming the over and under shotgun he pulled the first trigger.

Boom!

Boom!

From outside, Rhonda turned her head as something inside the house exploded. She never saw her father collapse in a heap. A second later there was another sound as her mother went down.

As he had practiced, Dirk opened the shotgun and the two spent shells popped halfway out. He grabbed them, tossed them on the floor and reached in his pocket for two more. Fumbling in the dark, he dropped them, but found the other two that he'd stuffed into his trousers.

He saw another target outside the side window and fired. The first shot shattered the glass that Rhonda had placed an unbreakable charm on. He fired the other barrel, but believed that he'd missed his target.

Outside, Bruce's leg had been peppered by the shot, but no artery or bone had been hit.

Pop, Pop, Pop, Pop!

The aurors arrived.

"Ministry Aurors! Drop your wands."

Bruce turned to hear the noise and was dropped by four stunners. In the light of the burning roof, he was quite visible.

Seeing the aurors arrive and hit her brother, Rhonda, quietly ran to the edge of the apparation field and silently slipped away.

Dirk called out and escaped the burning home while the aurors checked on the fallen Death Eaters before taking them back to the ministry. He had lost his home, but was alive, still holding the empty Holland and Holland.

... -- ...

Alastor Gumboil's experience was similar to Dirks, but not as lucky. He had dropped his phone and was half a minute finding it to make the call. In the meanwhile his wife had been hit by a cutting hex.

Gumboil fired the shotgun like Dirk had, but his aim wasn't as good. He seriously wounded two of the Death Eaters, and then turned his attention back to his bleeding wife. She wasn't badly wounded and they managed to bind the wound and all but stop the bleeding. The other attackers didn't try to come in; instead they focused on starting more fires.

Pop, pop, pop, pop!

The Aurors arrived, announced themselves and began trading shots with the Death Eaters. The two that had not been hit fired reductos at the Aurors before trying to run off. Both hit their target, but the dragon hide armor did its job. One of the unwounded Death Eaters was killed by returning fire and the other got away.

Gumboil managed to get his wife and son out of their home and along with the aurors, were able to put out the fire on their badly damaged home.

... -- ...

11:05

Back at the Auror office, things were barely hanging on. Fawcett had received five calls, and was currently on the phone with another. Moody had dispatched four Aurors to Phillip Manky's residence at Liconshire, two to Wimple's home in Westmoreland and two to Quim's place out in Birmingham. The calls had been from all over Britain and the other Aurors that they'd been calling to come in had yet to arrive.

Bones made a floo call to Hogwarts and warned Flitwick that there were a large number of attacks going on. Flitwick sent one of the elves to go wake Harry and Michelle. She had been recalled for the evening and took an emergency portkey back to the Auror office.

... -- ...

Flitwick decided that things were likely to get much worse during the evening and called all of the staff together. He put the castle on lockdown and had the fifth, sixth and seventh year students get up and dressed, waiting in their common rooms. He hoped that he would never need to call on them to help defend the castle.

Harry and Susan waited with the staff members for another fire call that they were certain would come during the night.

... -- ...

In Liconshire, Phillip Manky had given as good as he got. Mrs. Flint had murdered his wife as she ran out of the flaming house. Manky hit Flint with both barrels a second later. The aurors arrived and got into a firefight with two other Death Eaters, leaving one dead, another badly wounded and three wounded Aurors. The surviving aurors would later attest to the effectiveness of their new armor.

Felsenthal silently slipped away as soon as the Aurors arrived, leaving only a small fire burning Manky's home

... -- ...

In Westmorland, some 230 miles north of London, the arrival of the two ministry aurors turned the tide of the battle. Gilbert Wimple had shot two of the attackers, but he and his family had been badly wounded when their home exploded.

The aurors were double-teaming on Alecko Carrow when Wimple fired both barrels dropping Higgs. Within a few minutes of the aurors arrival, the fight was over, and the Aurors called in requesting that mediwitches be sent to the scene.

... -- ...

11:05

Wilber Plonker was a very capable lab technician. Unfortunately, he didn't know what a busy signal was. When Rolle and the other three Death Eaters fired incendio charms at his home near London, Plonker picked up the cell phone just like he had been instructed and pressed the 1 button, then the talk button. As calmly as he could he spoke his name, address and the words "Death Eaters" into the cell phone. He did not distinguish the beep - beep-beep that he heard as anything that he should be concerned about. He put the phone down, picked up the shotgun and fired both barrels at the nearest Death Eater through the window.

Stolle, the last Death Eater to be Marked, collapsed. Thorfin had a clear view of Plonker and fired the killing curse at him before he and the other two Death Eaters apparated away to their next assignment, the Granger residence.

... -- ...

11:06

Anita Quim, 23, lived in her parent's home in Birmingham, 150 miles NW of London. She had worked at the improper use of magic office for Madam Hopkirk for four years. For the last few months they had been working on a plan suggested by Director Bones to see if dark spells could somehow be traced.

Her parents were visiting relatives on the continent and would not be home for another two weeks. Like many younger people, she kept different hours than her parents, staying up much later in the evening and just barely getting to her desk before Hopkirk came to check on her.

Quim was in the shower when Lyle Borgin, Bletchly, Miles and the new guy Phillips arrived. As the music was playing at a normal (for 23) volume, she didn't hear them outside. However, she did smell the smoke as it began to engulf the two-story home.

She called as directed, shut off the light in her room, picked up the shotgun and shells and went hunting without bothering to get dressed.

The outside of her parents home was made of stucco, so the four Death Eaters were initially concentrating on igniting the roofline. Borgin directed the others to get closer to the house before they went for the windows. Miles and Phillips went around the back to work on that side of the house and a dog began barking.

Rushed by the dog, they cast reducto charms on the lower windows, breaking them. With the windows open and the music blaring, they barely heard the two blasts from the front of the house that put Bletchly and Borgin out of business.

Neither did they hear the two pops of the exhausted Aurors as they finally made it to the property. As they cast the incendio spells, Quim walked out the back door. Phillips turned his attention to the obviously attractive young woman standing out the back door. He never noticed her raise the shotgun and fire both barrels.

The two Aurors had been equally distracted, came to their senses as the shotgun roared and quickly dropped Miles. "Ministry Aurors," Nib called out. After getting at least one last eyeful, Nib offered Quim his Auror Cloak, as she was apparently quite cold, while Sunset worked on putting the fire out.

... -- ...

11:10

Back in the Auror office things were getting desperate. All of the aurors had been dispatched and the calls were still coming in. Moments ago, Fawcett had received calls from Anna Daily's mum. Connie, Anna and surprisingly the Minister of Magic, Rufus himself went to help.

Moments after Scrimgeour and the others left Fawcett received the call from Arthur Weasley. Michelle Wood, Tonks and Cadet Tuttle had just arrived and Amelia dispatched them with the instructions to be extra careful.

Fawcett and Bones were the only people left when Malfalda Hopkirk called half a minute later. Bones recognized the address as Fawcett

repeated it back and announced, "I'll take this one. No one else is available." Before Fawcett was able to argue she was gone.

... -- ...

Rolondo Lestrage was one of Tom Riddle's original Death Eaters. His two sons Rabastan, Rodolphus along with his young wife Bellatrix and Lucius Malfoy had formed the nucleus of the Death Eater's first reign of terror.

Now they were gone, and Rolondo placed much of the blame on blood traitors such as Weasley and his brood. Rolondo no longer cared if he lived to see his seventieth year, or took his last breath tonight, but the old wizard was determined to get his pound of flesh before the sun rose.

Popov was an older Eastern European that Lestrage had done business with off and on over the years. His family had minor blood connections to Lestrage and they shared the same viewpoints on most issues. Popov did not have the honed fighting skills that Lestrage did, but he wasn't afraid to draw blood or hear the screams of tortured victims.

Hector was similar to Felsenthal, a businessman who was willing to work with, and profit from Voldemort's ventures over the years.

Stone was a failed Auror cadet. He had all of the necessary skills, but was officially turned out of Tonk's class for unspecified reasons. In truth, Fudge had insisted on his placement into the program. Moody didn't trust him, and dropped him after the first term.

It was Stone who came up with the idea for their method of attack. They were aware that the property was likely to be well warded. As such they had chosen to fly onto the surrounding area with broomsticks, find the property and drop out of the sky before their targets could be alerted.

They circled the property, saw lights on inside the oddly shaped dwelling, no one outside and decided to launch their attack from four directions.

... -- ...

Charley Weasley was home for the evening visiting his parents and the twins. They had spent the evening catching up on each other's news and having a great meal together as a family.

They had listened with some interest as Arthur demonstrated the new muggle issued gear designed for home protection. Charley had seen shotguns in Romania and the twins were busy trying to figure out how to clone the cell phone to be a jokeshop best seller.

Bill and Fleur had left fifteen minutes before and Charley and the twins were just getting ready to go themselves.

Trained by his profession to always look skyward, Charlie noticed a Death Eater flying on a broomstick getting ready to land as he stepped out the door. Racing back inside, he demanded, "Dad, give me your shotgun and the box of shells. Use the cellphone and call the aurors. Mum, block the floo. Fred, George, we've got trouble outside."

... -- ...

11:15

St Mungos was having a hectic night. There had been four emergency calls from the Aurors to send mediwitches all over Britain in the wake of Death Eater attacks. What seemed different tonight was that all of the calls had come within five minutes and the victims and aurors had, for the most part, been wounded, not killed.

Head Healer Crabtree received another firecall from the Aurors office requesting a mediwitch to be sent to the Auror office. As the staff at St. Mungos had not been expecting anything out of the ordinary that evening, they did not have the staff on hand to respond to a fifth simultaneous call. Crabtree replied that she would send a healer as soon as one came available, or could help herself if the patient could be transported to the hospital.

She went to see if she could firecall some of the off-duty healers.

... -- ...

Things went badly for Rookwood, Lisa Rosier, Tucker and Gordon as soon as they arrived. A dog began barking and it yelped with an awful howl when Tucker hit it with a cutting hex.

Rookwood had just finished laying down the wards when he heard the distinctive popping sound of unwelcome visitors. He called out, "Aurors. Get 'em."

Connie was hit almost immediately and was unconscious and bleeding. Anna hit Lisa with a cutting hex that hit the femoral artery in her leg. The angry young witch fired off a final hex and bled out a half minute later.

Anna began parrying with Tucker and Gordon, hoping to hold them off until they made a mistake, or one of her partners was able to help.

Rookwood recognized Scrimgeour from the years that they had worked in the same building. Adopting Bella's tried and true strategy, he greeted his adversary, "Hello, Rufus. How's your family?"

Enraged by his words, Scrimgeour lunged in an attack. Rookwood cast a shield, laughed and asked, "So do you miss them?"

Scrimgeour overreached, tripped, fell to his knees and expected to have drawn his last breath, but Rookwood seemed to be energized by the challenge of facing an opponent who actually had the skills to fight back.

Scrimgeour didn't answer this time. Instead he put his hand in his robes and pulled an old Colt snub-nose revolver. As Rufus fired all five rounds from the police backup weapon, Rookwood had a surprised look on his face and slumped to the ground with his back against a tree.

He took a ragged breath; looked up at his killer and wheezed, "Have fun telling the Potter boy that you killed his best friend." He attempted to laugh, gurgled, and fell sideways.

Scrimgeour stood over the dead Death Eater for a moment as the reality of his final words sunk in. He was drawn back into the situation as Anna shouted, "Down!"

Years of training and practice kicked back in as the old auror dropped, rolled and came back up firing a bone breaking hex that shattered Tucker's chest, collapsing his lungs.

Anna fired the same spell and Gordon went down. A moment later Scrimgeour fired a stunner at the wheezing Death Eater, kicked his wand away, stunned Tucker, disarmed and stunned him.

He looked at Anna for a moment and said, "Good job. Go check on your mother, I'll call in a healer for Connie."

... -- ...

Malfalda Hopkirk, Head of the Improper use of Magic department was skilled at many things. Sadly, arthritis had claimed many of her motor skills over the years. While she was able to use the cell phone with the speed dial key pre-programmed, to make the call for help, opening the shrink-wrapped box of shotgun shells was beyond what her fingers were currently able to do.

As Gibbons and the two recruits set the house ablaze, Adrian Pucey decided on a very improper use of magic to finish off the old bat who'd had the nerve to send his parents a warning letter about Adrian's use of magic the summer after his third year.

Pucey put Hopkirk under a full body bind, cast the cruciatus curse on her for a few seconds and recast the full body bind hex to allow her to slowly be burned alive. Before he could finish the final spell, he heard a noise outside.

POP!

Bones arrived closer and louder than she should have. The two recruits, Han and Trump fired blasting hexes at her before she even saw them. Both hit and she was knocked back four feet. By luck or planning, she had been wearing her dragon hide vest and was hurt, but not mortally wounded.

Gibbons saw the two hexes fly as he was casting additional burning charms on the house. He turned to fire at her when he was hit by her

bone breaking hex. Gibbons, went down, wounded and in pain, but not out.

Han and Trump both fired blasting hexes at her. Again, she was hit, once in the chest and once in the left arm. The bone snapped and her arm was bleeding, but was still attached.

Bones rolled behind a tree. She was in horrible shape and was badly outnumbered. To top it off, she was well within the anti-apparation, anti-portkey wards that Gibbons had set up. Her cell phone was shattered, and she did the only thing that she could think of – she thought of Harry's phoenix, Freedom.

... -- ...

11:18

In her animagus form, Rita Skeeter had hopped a ride into the Auror waiting room and heard the grim talk of attacks all over Britain until Auror Hardman whose pocket she'd been hiding in was called away to respond to an attack at Leeds, some 300 mile north of London.

Shaken up by the apparitions, Skeeter hopped off as soon as they arrived.

Rachel Mulciber, Bole Derrick and Skyy were engaged in a fight with Cutbert Mockridge. Cutbert and Rachel hit each other as Skyy badly wounded Hardman who had unknowingly given Skeeter transportation with a cutting hex before Skyy escaped.

Bole and Derrick went after Cutbert's nearly eleven-year old twin daughters.

Refusing to allow her daughters to be harmed, even as her own life was slipping away from her, Mrs. Mockridge fired the shotgun at both of the rapists. All three of them died a minute later.

Shocked at what she had seen, happy to be alive, Skeeter, pulled a camera out of her pocket, took a half dozen photos and began apparating back to London to file her story.

... -- ...

11:20

Harry was sitting with the rest of the staff in Flitwick's office with the other staff members and Susan. Based on the firecalls that they had received, the situation around Britain was grim, but there had been no sightings next to the school or in Hogsmeade.

Suddenly, there was a flash, Freedom appeared and looked Harry in the eye. A moment later, Harry nodded, and announced, "I have to go. I'll be back as soon as I can." Harry pulled both wands out, Freedom hopped on his shoulder, and a moment later, he was gone in a flash.

... -- ...

The holding cells began filling with Death Eaters who had been portkeyed into the secured facility. The lone auror who was there was unable to process them properly, and didn't know if any of them had been thoroughly searched before being sent.

Most looked dead, a few were wounded, but there were no healers available.

The attendant re-stunned each of the prisoners and waited.

... -- ...

Harry was barely adequate at several things in his life, as Hermione would occasionally point out in a kindly way, but he was a master at situational awareness. Beck and Busch had barely registered the flash from the little phoenix when Harry had eviscerated both men with overpowered cutting hexes.

Less than a second had passed from the time that the cutting hex had left his wand and he had turned and ripped Pucey apart. A moment later, Harry saw Gibbons fire a carefully aimed killing curse at Bones, who was on the ground.

Harry's people saving tendency kicked in and he dove to the ground in front of the spell, with it hitting him squarely in the back.

Stunned at what she'd witnessed in the last seven seconds, Amelia lay on the ground, barely able to move, devastated that she'd traded her niece's lover's life for her own. She carefully fired a bonebreaking hex at Gibbons, ending his life.

... -- ...

Inside the burning house, Hopkirk watched in horror and was frozen in fascination as she watched the young man end the fight in a few seconds. She firecalled St. Mungos, got Crabtree and demanded that she and a staff of at least two others come immediately.

Meanwhile a phoenix flashed and vanished.

... -- ...

It wasn't a plan, but Charlie was pretty good at reacting. He called, "Mum, Dad, watch the back. Fred, George, we're going out on the count of three. Fred look left, George right. I'm going to pop the guy and we're heading back inside as soon as I fire. George, you close the door on the way back in."

The normally jovial twins gave each other a grim look, nodded and replied, "Ready."

"One."

"Two."

"Three."

Crash! The door burst open.

Boom! Charlie hit Popov Squarely in the chest.

Diffindo! Fred sliced his arm off.

"Stupefy!" George stunned the dying wizard.

"Back inside!"

As he reloaded Charley gave George a stern look and replied, "No more of the schoolyard shite. They didn't come here to stun us."

A voice from behind them called, "You're right." Rolondo stepped forward, wand pointed at Mrs. Weasley's throat. He demanded, "Drop your wands and that ridicules fireleg."

Charlie pointed the shotgun at Lestrangle and observed, "We seem to be at a bit of a standoff. Fred and George, go outside."

The twins did as they were told, and began trading hexes with Lector and Stone. As they were leaving, Charlie glanced behind Lestrangle and saw his father lying on the floor. He wasn't moving.

... -- ...

11:30

Anna Daily received the frantic call from Emma Granger that their home was under attack again. This time, the response was overwhelming. Most of the ministry aurors were in the breakroom, either back from their first call, or having been called in and awaiting another call. Some were hoping to collect on a Death Eater bounty, others were hoping to dish out some more vengeance. As the call was announced, twenty aurors responded within seconds. By 11:32, all three Death Eaters were on the ground, breathing their last breaths.

... -- ...

Back at the Burrow, Michelle, Tonks and Tuttle quietly walked onto the property. Michelle was clearly the senior person on the scene and directed, "Tuttle, go distract those two while Tonks gets into position to get them into a cross-fire. Everyone goes home at the end of the shift. I'll check in the front of the house."

Michelle silently maneuvered herself and saw Lestrangle through the window, holding Mrs. Weasley in a hostage situation. As quietly as she could, she opened the door a crack, took careful aim and cast a stunner at Rolondo.

He was hit squarely, but it didn't have quite the impact that she'd expected. It turned out that he was wearing a protective vest. However, he did release Molly, at least for a moment.

Charlie was many things, but being merciful against someone intending on hurting his family was not one of them. He pulled both triggers and Lestrangle's neck ceased to exist. As he fired, the hit witch was just opening the door behind Lestrangle and was splattered with blood and gore and some stray shot as she went down.

... -- ...

Tuttle did what he'd been told to do and as a result, he had to instantly drop to the mud to avoid a killing and cutting curse from the two Death Eaters. As their attention was momentarily distracted, Fred and George dropped Lector while Stone cast a shield against Tonks' stunner.

Stone admonished his former classmate, "You'll always be a loser, Tonks."

Those were the last words he ever said as he was simultaneously hit with a blasting and two cutting hexes.

... -- ...

Horried that he had somehow hit the witch, Charlie dropped the shotgun and rushed to Michelle, grabbed her, helped her to the floor and asked, "Are you alright? Looking down, he realized that he was checking her a little more closely than decorum would dictate, but she didn't seem to mind. Looking into his eyes, and blinking blood out of her eyes, she replied, "I'm... fine... thanks for asking."

An awkward moment passed until Charlie finally moved his hands. Michelle smiled and suggested, "Let's go check on your parents."

... -- ...

McGonagall shook her head in disbelief. Blatant product placements, cliffhangers, eroded trust in elected officials, sex before marriage, inconclusive battle scenes and the gleam in the old scribe's eye as he

watched her read the section about the youngest Weasley boy had taken its toll. She'd had enough.

"Mr. Crow," she announced, "We never use transfiguration as a punishment." With the thinnest of lips and an angry squint, she threatened, "However in your case, I believe an exception is merited."

The old scribe suddenly felt the immediate urge to hop on his steel horse and get back to his desk and finish his report. Quickly exiting the fuming administrator's office, he dropped a slip of parchment onto the floor.

McGonagall picked it up and read HP and the Story by Dad – Dad9

Still fuming, she envisioned a gray haired crow, and drew her wand.

... -- ...

Chapter 31 Ogden and the Beetle

"My Lord!" exclaimed Hopkirk as she heard the teen moan in pain. She had seen him sacrifice his own life and get hit with a perfectly cast killing curse in a desperate attempt to save the life of her friend, Amelia.

She fire called St. Mungos again and demanded, "Send all of the healers, *Now!*"

... -- ...

Poppy stood nervously along with the other professors, waiting in Flitwick's office, hoping for some news. Suddenly, there was a flash, and Harry's little phoenix appeared in the room. It hopped on Susan's shoulder and gave a pointed look at the master healer.

Susan clasped Pomfry's arm and demanded, "Let's go!"

Poppy hesitated and looked at Flitwick. She was obviously needed, but the school was in danger, and her primary duty was with the children.

Flitwick considered the situation for a moment and called, "Go!"

A second later Susan, the healer and the phoenix vanished in a flash of flame.

... -- ...

Rita had the story of her life. Believing that everyone had been killed, and that the attackers had left, she changed back to her human form. After taking a dozen photographs, she apparated back to London. If she hurried, she could still make the deadline and get the front page.

... -- ...

Although wounded, Arthur was alive, but unconscious. None of the other Weasleys had been hurt. Michelle got the facts of the attack written down, directed Tonks to check the Death Eaters, and Tuttle to contact St. Mungos.

Molly was frantic when she saw Arthur there, but they didn't want to attempt to floo him to St. Mungos.

Fifteen minutes later, two mediwitches arrived, and Mr. Weasley was portkeyed to St. Mungos.

Five minutes after that, Tonks portkeyed the Death Eaters, both living and dead, to the secured holding facility. Tuttle had gone back to Auror headquarters. Molly and the twins went to go be with Mr. Weasley.

Charlie kept asking, "Are you sure you're okay?" The obvious outdoorsman had a certain charm to him that appealed to Michelle. She wrote down her cell phone number on a slip of paper, handed it to Charlie and replied, "I normally teach at Hogwarts. Why don't you come by a week from Saturday at six and check on me? In the mean while, I need to get back to the ministry and you should go be with your family. She leaned up and gave him a quick kiss on the lips before leaving.

The gobsmacked dragon wrangler blinked a few times, felt his lips with his finger, looked at the paper that had a number on it and decided that he needed to buy one of those cellular telephones too.

... -- ...

Freedom and Poppy arrived with a flash, just feet away from Harry and Amelia. In equally pathetic voices they directed, "Help him/her, first."

Fortunately, Hopkirk had been sufficiently persuasive. Crabtree and two aids arrived a moment after Pomfrey. Crabtree and one of the aids looked after Amelia while the other assisted Pomfrey.

Poppy looked at Harry's smoking vest and asked, "The usual?"

The teen hero nodded and replied, "I also think I broke my wrist and a finger." She nodded as she carefully pocketed both of his wands before anyone else noticed them.

Borrowing equipment that Crabtree had brought, Poppy was able to remove the burned-on Ironbelly armor that Madam Malkin had made for him from the hide that Krum had sent. As she carefully removed the scorching hot material, Freedom hopped up and doused the area with healing tears. After the phoenix was done, she had Susan cast a cooling charm on his back between the shoulder blades where he had been hit and carefully rubbed them into his skin.

The aid looked on with rapt attention, awestruck that she was witnessing the treatment of a killing curse, on Order of Merlin recipient, Professor Harry Potter! She watched as he was cared for by his very own phoenix! The young witch had never seen one in person. Finally, when Poppy was as happy as she was ever going to get regarding the situation, she glanced at her favorite patient, then the aid, received a wink in return and asked the aid, "Martha, would you help Susan hold Professor Potter's hand and finger straight?"

The Hufflepuff who had finished two years ago nodded solemnly and did exactly as asked. Poppy expertly healed Harry's wrist and pinky finger as the two witches kept his hand immobilized.

Poppy was having the two witches help, partly as a treat to Martha, who Poppy remembered fondly from her days at Hogwarts, and also to keep Susan occupied. In truth, Crabtree was having her hands full with Amelia, who was not responding to the bruise healing treatments and apparently had massive internal bleeding.

She looked meaningfully at Harry, again made eye contact, then pointedly looked at Amelia, all the while, keeping the other's attention fixed on Harry's hand.

Harry thought about what he wished for, and the little phoenix hopped onto Amelia's abdomen and began shedding pearly white tears. Crabtree, who seldom had access to such medication, carefully rubbed them in where they were needed the most, to the utter amazement of her aid.

Within fifteen minutes, both patients were able to sit up!

... --...

Amelia was beside herself with guilt. 'Why did he do it? He has his whole life ahead of him.' She couldn't decide if his self-esteem was so low that he felt another's life was more valuable than his own, or that good that he instantly took a calculated risk to save... someone who loved him dearly.

Either way, she would find out and hoped to spend many evenings with him and Susan discussing life.

... -- ...

Poppy insisted that Amelia spend the night under her care. After using Hopkirk's phone and finding that there had only been one other call since her own, she acquiesced with her lifelong friend's demand. Freedom took the four of them back to the hospital wing.

Poppy wanted to keep Harry there, but smiled to herself as she noticed the look of urgency on Susan's face.

As she was getting settled into one of the beds, Amelia noticed the two hurriedly leaving and gave her friend a questioning look. Pomfrey smiled, and replied, "They're good for each other. They make a great couple."

... -- ...

2:00 AM

Moody waited in the dispatch/Auror break room. He pulled a pull from his flask. Sixty men and women had been sent into a battle. Some of those in the room had gone out once, a dozen had gone out twice, and a few hadn't been called on to fight.

Moody took a smaller pull on his flask and considered those who hadn't come back yet and those who wouldn't be coming back. The Death Eaters were successful in assassinating two of the nine ministry employees that they had targeted. They had also killed two spouses and wounded three of the victim's family members. None of the aurors who were sent to help were killed, though six were injured, some badly. Then there was Potter. The rumor was that he'd taken

another killing curse in an effort to save Bones' life and somehow he'd walked away again.

Moody shook his head in amazement, took another sip as he tallied the other side of the ledger. There had been a total of eleven attacks, with an average of four Death Eaters per attack. As most of them were within minutes of each other, he estimated that at least forty, probably fifty Death Eaters were involved. Twenty-eight had been killed in firefights and another eight had been captured. He speculated that the eight captured wouldn't live to see another sunset.

Moody wondered if they had taken out thirty-six out of forty or out of a hundred-forty Death Eaters off the streets. He'd talk with Rufus later and get his opinion.

... -- ...

Saturday morning at seven, Scrimgeour was on his morning rounds - visiting the wounded, and families of the fallen employees; telling them that their loved ones had died or were seriously wounded, and staying in St. Mungos.

He was pleased to see that the worst was behind them for Connie Hammer and Arthur Weasley. Both were expected to recover within a week or so. He didn't mention Rookwood's final words to Molly when he had greeted her under his long-standing policy - no body - no confirmation.

When he got to auror Vince Hardman's room, he saw the man raging at thin air, holding the newspaper with his remaining hand. Having worked together for years, Scrimgeour asked, "What's wrong, Vince?"

Hardman, practically threw the paper down and shouted, "She was there! She was some sort of insect. She could have helped." Panting for breath, the badly injured auror clarified his rant, "Skeeter. She was there. Mockbridge and his wife and their daughter... She could have helped save them. Instead she hid, did nothing to help and took effen pictures after they left... If I still had two hands, I'd choke her."

Getting the essence of the story, "Scrimgeour put his hand on his friend's shoulder, and commented, "I'll take care of her, Vince. You

get some rest and we'll talk again in a few days. You finished your shift. That's all that matters now."

... -- ...

Back at Hogwarts, the mood in the great hall was grim and frightened when the owls arrived with the newspapers. Skeeter's story had been run without any confirmation by the editors and, while largely factual for what it contained, completely mis-represented the bigger picture of the previous evening.

Dozens of Attacks throughout Britain – Death Eaters slaughter aurors, ministry workers

I am sad to report that this reporter personally witnessed a Death Eater attack in Leeds. At 11:15 last night, four Death Eaters attacked the home of ministry official Cutbert Mockridge, murdering him, his wife and an as yet unidentified ministry Auror.

I heard first hand from unidentified ministry sources that there were so many attacks last night that the DMLE was unable to even respond to all of them. As this story was filed mere minutes before the press deadline, the results of those other attacks had not been announced.

No statement was available from DMLE Director Amelia Bones, who did not answer my late night fire call requesting additional information.

There were several gruesome photos of Cutbert, his wife, the ruined home and one of Hardman, who appeared to be dead. While not specifically saying it, the clear implication was that there were scores of innocent victims murdered in gruesome ways.

On page two, there was another article that she had written.

Who will replace Scrimgeour and Bones? – No-confidence vote all but assured to retire the old guard

With another night of deadly widespread attacks all over Britain, it is virtually a given that Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour and DMLE

Director Amelia Bone will both be retired after the votes of a no-confidence call have been counted.

Roll call initiator Wizengamot Elder Tiberius Ogden was quoted yesterday afternoon as saying, "They haven't done anything to stop the daily weakening of our Government. I have respected Director Bones for years, but she appears to have run out of ideas and luck with respect to stopping the flood of dark forces that are rapidly bringing down the government. Minister Scrimgeour was a much better auror squad leader than a governor. He ignores his own rules out of frustration. I'm certain that a cooler head is what is needed to end this civil war that is rapidly destroying our society."

Based on personal observation, this reporter completely agrees.

About that time, one of the students noticed that Professor Potter was missing breakfast. Flitwick might be headmaster, but in the eyes of most of the students, Potter was the leader of the school. Many of the students were genuinely worried about their favorite professor.

... -- ...

Malfalda Hopkirk read the same articles, knew that things weren't quite as bad as they had been presented in the *Prophet* and began telephoning each of her co-workers.

... -- ...

Ogden was beside himself. He put the paper down and was positive that he would get way more than a majority for the vote that was to take place in less than two hours. He went out to tend his garden for a while; having decided that going in early, and fishing for votes would be in bad form. Tradition stated that in the event of a badly failed vote – usually considered less than a fourth of the votes, the caller of the vote would resign his seat. Ogden was so certain of himself that he never even gave it a second thought.

... -- ...

"He told me that he would ask her," announced Susan in a conspiratorial voice to Hannah the next morning at breakfast.

"Thanks, Susan," replied Hannah, knowing that Harry hated trading on his fame, but desperately wanting to see her boyfriend.

Hermione came over a moment later, not knowing that her parents had been attacked last night. She asked, "Did you see the paper?"

Susan replied, "No." She gave Hannah an inquiring look.

Hannah answered, "It sounds like there were a bunch of attacks last night, all about the same time."

Minerva and Poppy walked into the great hall, assisting Amelia. The student's chatter fell silent as they watched the three of them make their way to the table where Susan and Hannah were visiting with Hermione.

As they got to the table, Amelia found Flitwick sitting with some of the other students at the next table and announced, "Headmaster Flitwick, with your approval. I'm going to borrow my niece for the day."

"Fillius nodded and replied, "Of course. Susan is free to come and go as it is." A moment later, he added, "Good luck today, Director."

Amelia nodded and smiled. It was only by luck and Harry that she was there at all. Speaking of, she asked, "Where's Harry?"

Susan replied, "Madam Malkin is helping him with something." It was obvious to her that her niece hadn't told the others at the table, so she nodded.

Amelia nodded and mentioned, "I'd like you to go with Hermione and Minerva today. You three should go now. I'll go find Harry and be along in a few minutes with him."

They got up and Poppy said, "I'll walk with you."

...-- ...

It was obvious that bad news travels fast. There were hundreds of people just inside the ministry lobby. Hermione didn't recognize

anyone as she and Minerva made their way into courtroom one, while Susan made her way to the visitor gallery

...-- ...

8:55

Susan was getting worried. The hearing was scheduled to start in five minutes and Harry and Auntie hadn't arrived yet. Everyone else was seated. Suddenly there was a flash, and Freedom delivered Harry and Amelia to the floor. Amelia found Ben while Harry handed Susan wrapped package. He whispered, "Hang onto these for a few minutes."

Ben stood and announced, "We have three orders of business today." Tiberius looked triumphant.

Abbott continued, "The first is the confirmation of Susan Amelia Bones, who has been named to take over the Bones seat at the Wizengamot." It was an interesting ploy. Tradition dictated that someone would never vote for himself or herself. Allowing Bones to hand off the seat to her niece at the last moment, circumvented that tradition.

Tiberius got up to say something, but Ben beat him, saying, "I set the order of events, Elder Ogden. Please sit down." He called Susan up, administered the oath and she was seated next to Harry, who was sitting next to Ben.

After Susan was seated, Ben continued, "Elder Ogden, you called for a vote of no-confidence against Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour and DMLE Director Amelia Bones. Is there a second?"

After a few moments, a young wizard that Harry recognized as Blaise Zabini rose and announced, "I second the call of no-confidence."

Ben nodded, and continued, "Elder Ogden, You will give your remarks, I'll call for any brief comments from the gallery, then any other statements from the other Elders, and then we will call for a vote. The first vote will be regarding Minister Scrimgeour and the

second vote will be regarding Director Bones. Elder Ogden, you may proceed with your remarks.”

Ogden stood. He had decided to keep any conversation regarding his niece out of the discussion if at all possible. It would weaken his case slightly, but keep him clean and impartial and in a great position to be nominated for Minister, himself. He replied, “Thank you Elder Abbott. I’ve come here today out of concern. Concern for the lives of the ordinary witches and wizards of Britain, concern for our children, and concern for our very way of life.”

“Under Minister Scrimgeour’s tenure as Minister of Magic, our world has become less safe. There have been more deaths, shop closings and disappearances. The Dark Lord has grown stronger, while the ministry has seemingly failed to act. Our laws have been stretched, and it appears that we will soon be forced to capitulate with those who would seek to overthrow our government.”

“Under Director Bones’ watch there have been murders in this very building. Indeed, the Dark Lord has done battle in this very room. Her primary responsibility is our safety. She has been given all of the funding that she has requested, all of the staff increased that she has requested, yet according to the news, we lost more employees last night.”

“Should we be happy that we haven’t all been found murdered in our beds? Should we be pleased that our wives or children haven’t yet been burned alive or stolen right out from under our noses? Should we be pleased that the Dark Mark hasn’t been seen hovering above our homes and believe that the absence of the Mark above our homes is due to the leadership of these two rather than mere fortune?”

Ben didn’t agree with Ogden, but admitted that he was a very convincing politician.

Ogden continued, “Will we continue to rely on luck, or shall we decide that it is time to discard these two and redraw, hoping to improve our hands?”

Ben looked around, and Ogden was getting a few nods from the other Wizengamot members. H couldn't tell if they were simply listening and being polite, or if they truly agreed with Ogden's stance.

Ogden concluded, saying, "My vote is that we change our leaders now, before the Dark Lord changes them for us. Thank you for hearing my words, Elder Abbot."

There was a smattering of polite applause, but only just.

Ben nodded and asked, "Are there any comments from the gallery?"

"Aye," growled a voice from the back. "Just gimme a minute."

Alastor Moody got up, leaning heavily on his staff. He made his way slowly to the floor, pushing a cardboard box about the size of a whiskey case along with him. After a minute, he got to the spot that he wanted, stopped, conjured himself a crude high stool, bent down to pick up the box and sat down.

"Aye, I've a few things to say. I went through the auror academy a year or two ahead of Scrimgeour. Amelia was in my class. Smart, ambitious, good looking. Clever, the pair of them. Rose through the ranks, both of em. Amelia was a good one. Never forgot the everyday auror. Turned out to be good at figures and dealing with those who'd talk all day, but never get their hands dirty. Rufus was a fighter. As a squad leader, he made sure that the younger ones learned the ropes."

Ogden, stood and commented, "All of that is nice Mr. Moody, but it doesn't relate..."

Moody slammed down his staff with a crack and declared, "That's Master Auror Moody to you, Elder Ogden. I earned it. Damn few do. I'll make my point and sit down."

He opened the cardboard box and took out four dinner plates. "Doreen Manky ate off this plate. She was murdered last night." Moody dropped the plate on the floor and it cracked into pieces.

Ogden had a satisfied look on his face. It appeared that Moody was doing his work for him.

Moody continued, "Wilber Plonker worked in the Auror lab. He had a good eye for detail. He ate in the employee breakroom off a plate like this one." He dropped it, saying, "Plonker was murdered last night."

Scrimgeour wasn't sure where Moody was going with his rant, but admitted that it had captured everyone's attention.

Moody took two more china plates out of the box and dropped them. "Cutbert and Alice Mockridge were murdered last night. He kept things going in the goblin relation office in spite of every fuckup that Fudge could dream up. His Alice was a fine woman."

Ben was going to say something, but glanced at Amelia who gave her head the smallest shake no, and let Moody continue.

Moody took a bag out of the box, turned it upside down and dumped twenty-eight Death Eater masks onto the floor. More than a few of them were bloodstained. He said, "Due to the initiative of Director Bones, the quick funding approval from Scrimgeour, and the top-notch work of a lot of brave men and women, twenty-eight pieces of filth were put down for good last night."

The cheering from the gallery was thunderous, and it took Ben a minute to quiet them down again.

Moody continued, "Another eight were captured by the same group of people and hopefully will be put down like the dogs that they are before the sun sets."

More cheering erupted, and Ben let it go for another minute before even trying to quiet everyone down.

Moody concluded, "We're in a war. People are going to get killed, and families broke up like those plates. You want leaders who'll give you the tools to get the job done and take care of yourself. They did their job, now cut out this crap about no-confidence in good folk and get on with the real issues."

There had been a score of people who'd had their hands up to make a comment, but Moody had spoken for all of them. Nothing else really needed to be said. After the cheering, Ben asked for any other comments and called for a vote. "All those calling for no-confidence in Director Amelia Bones, raise your hand."

Ogden raised his in confidence, Zabini started to and saw that no one else had moved, and lowered his arm.

Ben waited a minute to see if anyone would change their mind and declared, "Motion failed. All those calling for no-confidence in Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour, raise your hand." This time there were three hands; the same three that voted against everything.

Ben declared, "The no-confidence vote has overwhelmingly failed. There will be a fifteen-minute recess, and then we will resume with the trials and other business." He gave a pointed look to Ogden.

... -- ...

Moody picked up the masks, and then carefully repaired each of the plates before putting them back in the cardboard box. He hobbled up to Ogden and in a voice loud enough for anyone nearby to hear declared, "Get your facts straight and stop carrying petty grudges. I expect to see you at each of their funerals making a big contribution to each of their memorials. Fifty-thousand a piece ought to allow you to still be here next month."

...-- ...

Hannah gave Susan a meaningful look. Susan gave one to Harry then to Mrs. Longbottom. Nodding, Harry walked over to Granny Longbottom, who greeted him, "Good morning, Professor Potter. How are you?"

Harry replied, "Fine. Thank you. I was wondering how Neville was doing."

Augusta was about to give the stock answer, but realized that Harry and Neville were good friends, and that he really was concerned. She

replied, "There's been no change, dear. The healers haven't given me any hope that he'll ever recover."

Harry suggested, "I'd like to go visit him sometime if you wouldn't mind." When she didn't immediately refuse he added, "If you wouldn't mind, my friends Susan and Hannah would especially like to come with. We won't stay long, but it would mean a lot to me if we could go see him. Maybe this afternoon?"

A tear trickled down the old witch's cheek. She nodded and replied, "You three can go whenever you want. I'll owl St. Mungos directly."

Harry replied, "He's a good man, and a good friend of mine. Thank you."

Across the floor in the galley, there was a squeal of joy.

... -- ...

The case against the Death Eaters was presented flawlessly. Anna had been up all night compiling the evidence and the notes. They were presented one at a time, with charges ranging to being a Death Eater, possessing Death Eater paraphernalia, one or more counts of attempted murder, arson, to those that were also charged with murder, or attempted murder of an auror. By noon, they had all been convicted and Ben called for a recess.

... -- ...

In the galley, Skeeter had written her notes and taken a few photos. She was leaving with the others when Moody blocked her way and said, "We have business with you, bug. Your hearing is next."

The other reporters grinned in delight as if Christmas had come early.

Auror Hardman came in, still missing his arm and gave his testimony about what had happened. Skeeter was given veritaserum, admitted to being an animagus, hiding in Hardman's pocket in a restricted area, leaving the scene of a crime and failing to come to the aid of an Auror.

She was fined twenty thousand Galleons and sentenced to five years in prison.

... -- ...

During lunch, most of the employees came up to Hermione and thanked her for her idea that helped save lives. It wasn't a medal, but it was heartfelt.

... -- ...

Hannah, Susan and Harry stopped over to St. Mungos after lunch. There was no evidence that Neville was ever going to get better. Harry was moved by the obvious love and anguish that Hannah was displaying, as she appeared to be saying hello and goodbye to her love, both at the same time.

Harry and Susan decided to wait outside to give Hannah a bit of time alone. After a few minutes, a teary eyed Hanna came out and carefully closed the door behind her. She spent several minutes sobbing in Susan's arms

Just as they were about to leave, a jolt of inspiration hit Harry. "Wait a tic, he announced. "I'll be right back." He walked back in the room and closed the door behind him.

After five minutes or so, Hannah began to get agitated and was about to ask that they go back to the castle. The stress was getting to her. Suddenly there was a whoop from inside the room and Harry shouted, "Susan, call for a healer!"

A minute later, a mediwitch came into the room, closed the door behind her, ran out the room closed the door behind her and shouted, "Healer Crabtree!"

Crabtree came by a minute later, practically dragged down the hallway by the excited mediwitch. They walked into the room and closed the door.

Ten anxious minutes later, Crabtree walked out and demanded, "Mr. Potter, come in here please."

Harry came back in, saw Neville awake, still with a face full of phoenix tears, made eye contact and in a quiet voice, said, "Hi, Nev." His patronus forms were still standing by Longbottom's bed.

Neville managed to croak out a reply, "Hi, Harry."

Meanwhile, his little phoenix kept singing his inspiring songs.

... -- ...

Randi Bell spent the afternoon delivering bounty bank drafts. Many of the aurors and employees agreed to split their checks with those who were with them at the critical moments. Harry didn't want his, but Randi and Susan made him accept the drafts, suggesting that he could decide what to do with them later.

In total, nearly two million galleons were distributed that day.

... -- ...

While a delighted Hannah was becoming reacquainted with Neville, Scrimgeour ordered the execution of all of the prisoners, saying, "It's time to take out the trash."

Later it was reported that Umbridge and Skeeter must have somehow escaped. Scrimgeour ordered that the Gringotts goblins come in and reapply anti-animagus wards to the secured area. Nothing else was said or written about the matter in any of the newspapers or magazines.

... -- ...

McGonagall reflected on her words for a few minutes before commenting. It was hard to rejoice at death, irrespective of the circumstances. It had become obvious to her that Gryffindor house would never see its keeper again. She felt sorrow for the mothers who had lost sons or daughters, mothers or fathers, nieces or nephews and those who had lost spouses.

“Mr. Crow,” she commented, “Your stories are more complex than they appear. You gave Augusta back her reason to live, but wouldn’t do the same for poor Molly.”

Crow remained wary of being too near her wand, but thought, ‘I gave her back her husband.’

She continued, “You left them in the hands of a capable but highly flawed leader.”

Crow could only nod in agreement to that statement.

Finally she admonished, “You still have not provided the level of closure that most would come to expect.”

The old scribe nodded as he walked to the edge of the grounds. There was one more report to present.

... -- ...

Chapter 32 - Epilogue

... -- ...

As it turned out, the October Defense as it came to be called broke the back of the Death Eaters offense. There were no more large-scale attacks against the ministry, although every incident since continued to be blamed on Voldemort or the Death Eaters.

There were several serious acts of terrorism in the UK in the final months of the year. There was a serious explosion on Charing Cross Road and a bus blew up on Aldwych Road but there was no direct evidence that either Voldemort or Death Eaters were to blame. Shortly afterwards, Parliament passed the Prevention of Terrorism (Additional Powers) act of 1996.

... -- ...

12 December 1996

Life seemed to return to normal for Harry, or as normal as it could ever be. Hagrid had helped him collect nearly a thousand strands of unicorn hair in an effort to help him start his wandmaking business.

Harry did enjoy co-teaching his defense class with Michelle. They made a great team, and it was easily the favorite class among the students.

Harry and Susan subscribed to several newspapers and carefully read them each morning. Each day, they expected to hear of some act of terrorism, or a Voldemort sighting.

... -- ...

“Detention, the both of you. Miss Granger, I’m disappointed in your lack of judgment. Mr. McLaggen, I will not stand to hear that kind of talk about or from my Gryffindors. Miss Granger, you have detention tomorrow evening with Professor Potter. Mr. McLaggen, Mr. Filch needs some help regrouting the latrines in the first floor wing. If it takes six evenings, so be it.”

McGonagall looked like she wanted to say much more, particularly to Hermione, but wisely kept her anger and disappointment to herself, allowing it to dissipate. She recognized that her favorite student's support group had largely collapsed with Harry getting involved with his work and Susan, and Ron's abduction, but why in the world would she take up with a big mouth, lout like McLaggen was beyond the old witch's comprehension.

McGonagall had wished that Hermione and Neville could have started a relationship, but it had quickly become obvious to her that the Abbott girl had gotten there first.

Minerva decided to have a talk with Harry and Susan and ask them to try and spend more time with Hermione.

... -- ...

"Down!"

The class of twenty-six third years dropped onto the cushioning mats that Harry had set up and rolled a few feet to their right.

Harry was satisfied with everyone's progress and conjured several archery sized cardboard targets and set them alongside the side wall of the classroom. He announced, "This time I want you to drop and roll, then draw your wand and from a prone position, shoot red sparks at the target that is closest to you."

From the back of the classroom, Minerva watched as the three-time killing curse survivor did everything that he could to ensure that all twenty six students in his classroom would live to finish school at the end of their seventh year. While a part of her wished that Harry could be in class himself and these little ones studying hinkypunks, she knew that the times had necessitated a change.

As Harry dismissed his attentive classroom and the students as one chanted, "Thank you, Professor Potter," Minerva approached him.

"You are indeed an engaging educator, Professor Potter. The students speak of little besides your lessons."

Harry considered her words for a moment, and replied, "Thank you, Professor. They may find defense relevant, but it's mostly just applying the things that you and Professor Flitwick have taught them."

She looked at him a moment, saw his sincerity and replied, "Thank you, Harry. Thank you for doing what you can to keep them safe." Remembering her original purpose and noting that the students had all left, she added, "I assigned Miss Granger an evening of detention with you tonight."

Harry remained silent, waiting for her to continue.

"She seems to have... lost her anchor and has been making some bad choices. I was hoping that you could spend some time asking about her decisions and plans."

Harry waited again, but Minerva wasn't going to elaborate. He nodded and replied, "I would be happy to help."

Minerva nodded and went back to her own classroom, hoping that the young hero could help Hermione see her own worth and make better choices.

... -- ...

Meanwhile, Amelia, Ben and Rufus were having a very frustrating meeting in Scrimgeour's office.

"You can't keep doing that," shouted Ben. He was beyond angry at Scrimgeour's continued practice of executing prisoners. According to the news he'd heard, Umbridge and Skeeter had joined the Death Eaters in their fate beyond the veil.

Scrimgeour calmly replied, "The situation hasn't changed. We don't have a secure long-term facility. Skeeter is officially listed as having escaped."

Amelia asked, "Do you want Azkaban re-opened or someplace new on mainland Britain? We have sixty-six able bodied aurors. The next cadet class to graduate has thirteen students. Minimal staffing would

be five on duty for each shift, costing us a total of 20 employees plus an overall warden.”

She continued, “We staff the holding cells as needed – typically with two aurors on duty.” Giving Scrimgeour a pointed look, she added, “The holding cell population has not overtaxed the maximum capacity of twenty, since May largely due to executive execution orders. To my knowledge, they have all been legal. As Rufus mentioned, Delores and Rita are listed as having escaped on Alastor Moody’s watch. When interviewed, he claimed that he was cleaning his eye and never noticed anyone entering or leaving.”

“How many prisoners are there now?” asked Ben.

“One,” replied Amelia. “Stan Shunpike was arrested last night after creating a disturbance in the Leaky Cauldron. He got drunk again and started telling anyone who would listen that he’d had ‘He-who-must-not be-named take the knight bus from London to Yorkshire.’”

“Aye, and then his arse fell off. Let him go,” ordered Scrimgeour. “He’s just the sort of idiot that we’re fighting for. Besides, I told Potter that I wouldn’t hold him as prisoner. I’ll talk with Tom and ask him to 86 Shunpike after one pint from now on.”

“What about long-term prisoners?” demanded Ben. He wasn’t going to allow himself to be sidetracked.

“We’ll reopen Azkaban next September and keep the dafties safe until then.”

... -- ...

The young woman knocked on his office door, and walked in, “Good evening, Professor.”

“Just Harry, Hermione.”

“It’s Professor Potter, Harry. You earned it, and I respect you.”

Harry nodded, invited her to sit in one of the comfortable chairs and asked, “Okay, so what brought you here?”

Hermione didn't say anything for several minutes. Harry sat there, patiently waiting for his friend to collect her thoughts. Finally she replied, "Cormac was sitting at the table next to Professor McGonagall in the great hall, talking to some of his mates, telling them that I'd given him a lousy bl..."

Harry cut her off. He knew McLaggen was a braggart, but not a liar, and didn't need to hear those details from his lifelong friend. "Hermione, you can discuss technique with Susan, if you need to." He chose his words carefully and asked, "Is McLaggen the one that you want to learn those things with?"

Not meeting his eyes, she replied, "No...Yes... I don't know."

Harry gave his friend a careful look and suggested, "Just don't do anything that can't be undone." A minute later he added, "You have a lot of friends and family who care about you, Hermione. Now what's really wrong?"

Tears welled in Hermione's eyes. She got up, originally thinking that she'd make a dash out of his office door. Instead, she flung her arms around Harry and whimpered, "Harry, I miss you, I miss Ron. I miss being your friend. I always thought we'd... I always thought I'd... I don't know what to do."

Harry held his friend, much less awkwardly than he would have six months ago, patted her on the back and swayed with her a bit. He suggested, "There are lots of nice guys out there, Hermione. Not everyone worth knowing goes to Hogwarts. You'll meet the right guy someday." He carefully wiped the tears from her eyes and kissed her on the forehead.

Hermione kept her eyes down and nodded as she walked out the door. As she closed the door to go back to Gryffindor tower she whispered, "But he'll never be you."

... -- ...

A few hours later, Moody put his flask back in his pocket and replied, "At least you held em off for eight more months. I'll track em all down by then. I'll put em down."

Rufus handed Moody a Gringotts draft that was in the amount of the reward money that he'd received for killing Avery, McNair and Rabastan Lestrage when they had murdered his family. He said, "I can't give you anything officially, since there won't be any bodies. I hope this is enough for your trouble."

Moody, picked up the draft without looking at it and put it into his pocket. He replied, "I'll take care of it. Celia was a good woman, Rufus." They shook hands and parted.

Moody apparated to just outside of Gringotts, and deposited the draft into Lisa Wood's trust fund, then went on his way.

... -- ...

Christmas 1996

The winter had been unseasonably warm, bring them occasional rain rather than snow. Minerva offered to stay in the castle while Flitwick spent the morning and afternoon visiting old friends and relatives. It was early afternoon when he arrived in Welshpool at the Bones estate. Harry was out picking out wand wood pieces. Filius came out to greet him.

"Happy Christmas, Harry."

"Happy Christmas, Filius." They both greeted each other warmly. They really did have an outstanding working relationship.

Filius inquired, "What are you collecting?"

Harry added another stick into his already full bag and replied, "More birch pieces for wands. Walk with me?"

Flitwick nodded and they went through the woods. After selecting a few pieces as Harry chattered on about woods and clarity, they came to the rock that Harry had exploded. Flitwick had always had the niggling feeling that something else had happened here that afternoon. While Harry was looking up for wood, Flitwick was looking at the ground.

As he looked at the rocks, both large and small, Filius found the remains of an apparently dead snake. A feeling of immense dread came over the little professor as he levitated the rock that was sitting on it.

... -- ...

Inside Susan was having a fine time flicking raisons back and forth with Amelia. The older woman inquired, "Do you think he's going to ask?"

Susan chewed on her thumbnail as she was in the habit of doing when she was a little girl, looked her great aunt in the eye and nodded.

Suddenly Smidgen came in, looking very agitated. Amelia noticed and asked, "What is it, Smidgen?"

"The Bad One," replied the shaking little elf. Susan held her arms out and the little elf leapt into them for comfort.

"I'll go check," announced Amelia. "Keep your phone handy and lock the doors. Call Connie just in case."

... -- ...

"What is it?" asked Amelia as she caught up with Harry and Flitwick.

"Tom Riddle," replied Flitwick.

"Just an old snake," corrected Harry.

"No Harry, watch," announced Flitwick. He cast the spell to have an animagus return to its normal state. A moment later, the dried up snake turned onto a withered old hand that dripped some gooey substance that might have been blood.

Bones gasped in horror as she saw the snake transform.

Connie and Anna arrived a moment later. Anna asked, "What's that?" She snapped a photo as she asked.

Flitwick replied, "What's left of Tom Riddle."

Harry replied, "No Professor. It was just an old snake. I'm sorry for troubling your holiday, Connie and Anna. Let's go inside. It's starting to rain."

He waved his Freedom wand at the remains and cast incendio maximus. A small but blazingly hot fire flew out of his wand and consumed the remains.

"Why did you do that Harry?" asked Flitwick. "You could have collected a huge bounty for them. The wizarding world would have celebrated."

"A million Galleons," agreed Amelia, who thought she understood his reasoning, but wanted to hear it in his own words.

"The wizarding world didn't do so well when he was vanquished when I was one," cited Harry. "Fudge got elected and he let or forced everything important to go to seed. Someone like Moody with his "constant vigilance" mantra became a sort of joke. There'll be another dark lord some other day. We need to stay ready. If the wizarding world keeps moving forward with technology and stays watchful, that's worth a million galleons to me. You have your photo. Show it to Scrimgeour or put it in your vault, just don't publish it. Please?"

Connie was going to say something about destroying evidence, but Harry cut her off. "Besides," started Harry, "Half of the wizarding world wouldn't believe it anyway. They don't know how he came back, and who would see anything recognizable except a couple of blackened, gooey fingers? Some nut case would try and steal it to get him back again. Some good people would get killed in the process. It's better this way."

"You're right, Harry," agreed Amelia envisioning all of the things that could go wrong that no one needed.

"Come inside for dinner," she suggested. "Anna and Connie, Filius, Smidgen has already set places for you. Come in."

... -- ...

Later that evening:

Yes! Yes! Yes!! Auntie!!

... -- ...

May 2007

Neville glanced at an article in the Daily Prophet as he ate his breakfast.

Death Stick Legislation Passes

The Wizengamot passed the so-called Death Stick bill yesterday. The vote was 43 – 6 with Professor Harry Potter electing not to vote on the issue, due to a potential conflict of interest. Minister Scrimgeour was quoted as saying, “We have ignored the issue far too long. The use of unregistered or legacy wands by those who are intent on breaking the law has resulted in dozens of deaths in the last few years.”

“Additionally the consequences of accidental or uneducated magic by pre-hogwarts witches or wizards has been both tragic and preventable. Almost every year there is an accidental death or serious injury of a young witch or wizard performing unsupervised magic using a legacy wand.”

According to the terms of the legislation, UK witches or wizards will have 30 days to turn in the so called Death Sticks, or apply for a special permit to possess and carry a second wand.

DLME Director Amelia Bones was quoted warning, “The Ministry is not in the business of handing out permits for everyday witches and wizards to carry a second wand and citizens applying for a permit should expect a denial rate in excess of 90 percent.”

Terms of the legislation dictate that witches and wizards turning in wands will be reimbursed at a rate of 50 galleons for each wand in working condition. Master wandmaker Ramone Ollivander has been retained by the ministry to be the final judge with respect of the functionality of the returned wands. Witches and wizards are

reminded that the penalty for possessing an unregistered wand is a class one misdemeanor with a maximum penalty of one year in prison per offense.

Neville was sitting by Harry as they read the article together. Neville noticed the strange look on Harry's face and asked, "What is it, Harry?"

Harry thought for a moment and replied, "Mr. Ollivander charged me seven galleons for my wand.

Neville chuckled and replied, "Gran paid sixty for mine, which is pretty standard for a dragon heartstring wand. Maybe he gave you a good deal because you were the boy-who-lived."

... -- ...

June 1997

Harry reread the letter that Mr. Ollivander had sent him three months ago for what seemed like the fortieth time.

Dear Mr. Potter,

I have relocated to Bermuda and find that I enjoy the scenery and the lifestyle very much. As such I propose the following:

One) to sell you 1/3 of my existing stock of finished wands.

Two) to sell you 2/3 of my existing stock of wand blank wood.

Three) to sell you my extensive collection of wandcrafting notes and rare instructional guides.

Four) to tutor you for six hours a day, four days a week between June 17 and Aug 28, 1997.

Five) during the next nine months, I will return to my home in Bermuda and occasionally come back to London to open the shop from time to time for the purpose of selling off my portion of the remaining wands at retail. That will satisfy the immediate need for

wands and discourage any potential competitors from opening a shop in Daigon Alley.

Six) between June of 1997 and the end of March 1998, you will craft and finish a minimum of 24 wands from at least 6 different wood styles and at least 3 different wand cores. I will examine them and if I find them to be of superior craftsmanship, serviceability and finish, I will send them to another master wandmaker for evaluation. Should they be found fit, the title of master wandmaker shall be conferred on you.

The current stock of finished wands is estimated to be 600 wands, and is more than sufficient to fit even the trickiest customers such as yourself. Annual sales are typically 300 wands, although that number could grow dramatically as your MoM, Rufus Scrimgeour is proposing legislation to mandate that wands of deceased witches and wizards be destroyed within 30 days of their deaths. Further he has requested that the wands of prisoners convicted and sentenced to terms longer than 5 years have their wands snapped, although they would be eligible to repurchase another upon their release. As he has collected signatures of each of the aurors in support of both measures, I expect that both bills will pass when presented in May.

The premises that the current shop occupies are leased from Gringotts under a 99-year lease that expires at the end of 1998. As such, I recommend that you consider purchasing the building next to the Weasley brothers shop. I know the building to be available and believe the asking price is both fair and within your considerable means.

The asking price is 25,000 galleons. Terms are available if needed.

Sincerely,

Ramone Ollivander

Harry had shown the letter to Susan and Amelia as well as the business advisor from Gringotts that was tutoring Harry. They all agreed that while the asking price was in excess of the fair market value of the finished wands, the notes, documentation and rare wandmaking manuals were nearly priceless, and pointed out that

Harry could easily afford the purchase if he was interested. Harry had signed the purchase agreement that Mr. Ollivander had drawn up and sent back a bank draft the next day.

... -- ...

Susan kissed her fiancé while Amelia looked on and said, "Have a good day at work Harry.

Harry apparated to Diagon Alley, greeted Tom the barkeep at the Leakey Cauldron and walked into the wand shop.

Harry greeted Mr. Ollivander, who gave him a piercing look with his gray eyes before greeting him. They got to work, inventorying the existing wands and stock of wood; Ollivander commenting on the characteristics of each piece. Harry was truly enjoying the crafting process.

As they were eating their lunch together, Ollivander commented, "There are lots of opportunities in life, Harry— it's the ones that we choose that matter."

Harry nodded in understanding. He was certain that he would enjoy the summer.

... -- ...

August 1997

In his own mind, Alastor Moody never really retired. After the October defense, he went searching for Death Eaters and any trace he could find of Voldemort, primarily to put them down, but also to bring closure for Molly Weasley who fed him like a king anytime that he came by.

It had taken the old warrior months to track her down. He started in Palermo, picked up her trail in Bari, which led him to Napoli then Roma. He had missed her by days there. In common, they were all cities by the sea. Moody consulted his map and tried the walled city of Lucca.

Limping down the narrow walkways between buildings, he finally found her outside the Tratoria de Leo having a bowl of soup. Moody silently stunned her, cast an anti-apparation field, and then an anti-portkey field. He kept one hand under the table, holding a revolver similar to the one that Rufus had used on Rookwood, and re-ennervated her. "Hello, Narcissa," he growled as he poured himself a small glass of wine from the half carafe that was on the table.

"What do you want, Moody?" She was still a beautiful woman, but the last year or so had not been kind to her.

"Let's see your arm."

Rolling up her sleeve and exposing the underside, she replied, "Fine. There's nothing to see."

Moody had done his homework. He replied, "There was. I know that you were Marked."

"True enough, but as you can see, it's gone. The mark burned badly last August and continued to burn for a day or so. Then it faded and finally disappeared."

Moody nodded as if the news that she'd told him hadn't surprised him. As calmly as she could, she asked, "Now what?"

Moody finished his glass of red wine and answered, "Now I can go home. You were the last. "

He fired three shots, got up, took a few steps to go around the corner and disappeared.

... -- ...

Christmas 1997

"Aren't you going to use the charm?"

"I want us to get pregnant and I want to get married. At this point, the order doesn't really matter. Put a baby in me, Harry."

“When do you want to get married?”

“The day school ends. I’d like a double wedding with Hannah and Neville. Can we?”

“I just want to make you happy. Have you talked with Hannah?”

“No. I wanted to talk with you first, but he asked her last Saturday. Are you sure it’s okay?”

“I’m sure. What do I need to do to help?”

“Nothing. We’ll talk with Auntie in the morning.”

The moonlight through the window shined on the two loving teens.

... --

June 1998

At the start of the leaving ceremony, all of the students and staff had gathered on the quidditch pitch. The parents of the students who were finishing had all been invited. Harry personally assisted the parents of the muggleborn student to get to the castle with the aid of Freedom the phoenix. Michelle gave several hour-long tours to those that had never seen the castle before as Harry went out and collected the parents.

After Flitwick’s opening remarks, Ramone Ollivander was called up to present the wandmaking mastery certification for Harry. Ollivander had made a display case of for the twenty-four wands that Harry had made for the testing. Each was marked by core and wood type. There were wands made with phoenix feather, dragon heartstring, unicorn hair and a wand core that no one in the room had seen before – mermaid hair. For wood selections, he had made samples with birch, oak, willow, redwood, apple, and two made from eucalyptus wood that had been grown in Tasmania.

Most of the people there were quite surprised as few know of Harry’s interest in crafting wands.

... -- ...

To the surprise of no one, Head Girl Hermione finished with the highest scores of her year in Charms and Transfiguration as well as the highest overall score of any of the students in her year. As such, it fell upon her to give the leaving student speech.

“Fellow students, factuality, friends and parents – a little more than seven years ago, I was introduced to the magical world. After a follow-up visit from Professor McGonagall to assure my parents that the magical world was real and the Hogwarts offer letter was genuine, I accepted the offer. It was a world of wonder and delight. It turned out to be a world much like the one that my parents had known. It had good people and bad people. Some had clever ideas while others were hopelessly bogged down with a bigoted mindset.”

“I joined Hogwarts with sixty-five other first years. Being a classmate and a friend with Harry Potter and Ron Weasley kept things interesting. In between lessons, we ran into a troll, Voldemort, a basilisk, Voldemort, dementors, death eaters, dragons and Voldemort.”

“I learned to fly a broom.” There was laughter at that part. Hermione’s meager flying skills and fear of flying on a broomstick were legendary.

“I learned how to turn a rock into a rocking chair.” She took out a small pebble out of her pocket, set it onto the floor, concentrated for a moment and created a beautiful black onyx carved rocking chair that any museum would be proud to display.

“Most importantly, I learned the value of friendship. The skills I learned and the friendships that I made literally saved my life several times.”

“There were losses in our class. There are forty-one of us finishing today. Some left, some made poor choices and were killed, imprisoned or executed. Some were taken from us, one was returned to us. Two left our class early to pursue an accelerated academic curriculum, one came back to teach us and lead us. Speaking for myself and for the others, I say, thank you Harry. Our lives are brighter and safer for having known you.”

“As we leave this place of learning, at least for a while; I challenge each of you to do what you can to move the wizarding world out of the 19th and into the 21st century.” Surprisingly, the loudest cheering after her remarks concluded came not from the students; rather the aurors, some of whom had arrived early for the evening events.

... -- ...

The double wedding that evening was as memorable as could be. Hannah and Susan looked radiant. Hermione and Michelle were the bridesmaids, while Fred and George Weasley were the groomsmen.

All of the students, staff, aurors and most of the members of the ministry staff had been invited. They also invited the Weasleys, Grangers and other family friends. It seemed that between the Abbotts, Longbottoms, Bones and Harry, they knew a lot of people.

Harry danced almost every dance. By the end of the evening, he recalled dancing several times with Susan. He also spent time on the dance floor with Amelia, Malfalda Hopkirk, Hannah, Minerva, Hermione, Poppy, Michelle as well as a few of the braver second year students.

... -- ...

Susan held her new husband tightly as they swayed to the music. Neither was an accomplished dancer, although Minerva had coached Harry several times in the preceding weeks. The new Mrs. Potter put her face close to Harry's ear and gently asked, “You're not disappointed that I'm pregnant, are you?”

Harry gently put his fingers on her cheek and looked into the depths of her blue eyes. He replied, “I couldn't be happier. How about you?”

Susan looked back and replied, “Loving you is everything that I could want, but having a baby together makes it better.”

Harry asked, “Have you told anyone else?”

Susan admitted, “Beside Madam Pomfrey, just Auntie and Hannah.”

They were very comfortable in each other's arms.

... -- ...

Poppy was having a great time. She was, by her own admission a bit of a recluse, but had been asked to dance by Neville, Charlie, Fred and George Weasley, and finally by Harry himself.

"You look very handsome tonight, Harry."

"Thank you, Poppy. I'm only here tonight by your skill."

"You've done a bit for the world yourself, Harry. Let's not keep score."

Harry nodded. As they were a ways away from the others, Poppy mentioned, "When the two of you get back from your honeymoon, I'd like to see the both of you for an office visit. Susan's about seven weeks along. Be certain that she gets enough rest if she gets tired. I gave her information on nutrition. Eat well, and no alcohol."

Harry nodded. He'd do anything to keep his new family happy and healthy.

... -- ...

The newly minted Mrs. Longbottom looked up at Harry, kissed his cheek and said, "Thanks for putting this on, Harry. My folks are fairly well off, but we never could have afforded this. There must be over a thousand people here tonight."

Harry scrunched up his nose and reflected, "It's only a bit of gold."

She looked at him and blue eyes met green. She nodded and replied, "Thanks, for everything."

Knowing that she was referring to his rather unorthodox revival of Neville, he replied, "No worries."

... -- ...

Harry asked his oldest friend, "So what's next for you?"

Hermione replied, "I've been accepted at Oxford. I'm pretty excited. I'm not certain how it will work out, but I want to try it."

Harry nodded, thinking he couldn't envision a better use of Hermione's Death Eater bounty money for his good friend. He noticed that she had come alone and inquired, "Did you call it quits with Cormac?"

She nodded. A tear welling in her eyes, she acknowledged, "You were right Harry. He's all mouth and no trousers."

Given the context of their original discussion regarding McLeggen, Harry bit his lip to avoid saying anything that would hurt his friend's feelings any worse than they were.

"I don't think he ever loved me."

Harry patted her on the back as the song ended and promised, "It will all work out for you someday."

... -- ...

Michelle smiled as she danced with her teaching partner; well former teaching partner. She had announced her resignation at last week's staff meeting.

Harry remarked, "It will be strange having Charlie teaching Magical Creatures next year and Hagrid in France. I'll miss seeing you everyday."

"Michelle replied, "That's so sweet Harry. We'll just be living a few miles outside of Hogsmeade. We'll see each other. I've always wanted to be a squad leader, and when Director Bones offered me the position, I couldn't turn it down. Besides, its evenings eight to eight and Charlie will teach from ten to three. Smidgen's nephew Zoey agreed to come stay with us and watch little Lisa, so I know it will work out."

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and said, "Thank you, Harry, for everything that you've done – both the announced stuff and the

unannounced. You're a good man, Harry and a great wizard. You'll always be my hero." She winked at him.

Harry smiled and replied, "I guess I'll be the senior instructor next term."

As the dance ended Michelle replied, "You were *always* the senior instructor, Harry."

... -- ...

"We'll be three weeks," explained Harry to Amelia. "Ramone found the property for sale down the road from his home. It's up on a hill a bit back from the beach. The account managers at Gringotts handled all of the paperwork."

Amelia nodded as they followed along with the music. She reminded him, "There's plenty of room at Welshpool when you two get back. You always have a home."

Harry smiled at the woman who had done so much to improve his life, and replied, "Thank you, Ms. Bones."

... -- ...

McGonagall had her quill out, already dipped in red ink. She had been critical of the loose ends that had come and gone throughout the story. "Poison, snake – dead or alive, Umbridge, Skeeter, Ollivander, marriage, retirement," one by one she ticked them off.

Grudgingly, she accepted the unloaded Holland and Holland and added it next to the Mizuno irons.

"What about Ms. Granger?" The bright eyed genius had always been her favorite, in spite of the young witch's tendency to develop relationships with... losers.

The old scribe thought for a minute, recalled a story that he had started with another friend, smiled and walked out the door. Maybe he would look it up and see if he had any unused quills left.

Unnoticed by McGonagall, he dropped a scrap of paper on her desk that read DobbyElfLord – Storyteller.

McGonagall persisted, “What about young Mr. Weasley?” She couldn’t imagine a worse fate than slow starvation for the young man.

‘Reread chapter one, page one,’ thought the old scribe. ‘If he’d ever bothered to learn anything from his brothers, rather than his endless obsession with chess, he would have picked the lock the first night that he was there and escaped. Instead he sat there playing with his pieces as he slowly starved to death.’ Personally, Crow couldn’t envision a more ironic fate for the always-hungry lad. He supposed that it was unfortunate that Weasley’s remains were never found. His business concluded with McGonagall, Crow fed his steel horse, fired it up, and went off in search of his next report.

End.

... -- ...

A/N

Thank You Ms. Bones is a much better story than I could possibly have made it due to the eagle eye of Mr. Evan Mayerle. If there are mistakes in the story, they are mine, typically induced after he sent me the files back, and fanned by my incessant need to tinker.

I must also thank a man I’m proud to call a friend, Steve, who knowingly or unknowingly inspired me to write this story, and equally important, to finish it.

As with all of my stories, there are notes written for a follow-on tale and a few pages drafted. Perhaps it’s time to look the various drafts over.

Finally, as I wrote this last page, I looked and 807 readers have this little story listed as a favorite. I would like very much to hear from each of you.

Best wishes,

O-C

... -- ...